

THE CALL OF THE HILLS

Marshall Benjamin Van Leer

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A VOICE AS SOFT AS A SUMMER BREEZE AND YET DISTINCT SPOKE TO HIM OUT OF THE SILENCE: "MY SON, FOLLOW ME; THE PATH OF DUTY LIES IN THESE HILLS."

THE CALL OF THE HILLS

Marshall Benjamin Van Leer



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DEDICATED
TO
MY FAITHFUL FRIEND
AND KIND CRITIC
Frank A. Behymer

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THE CALL OF THE HILLS

CHAPTER I

THE COMING OF THE SCHOOL-MASTER



LATE in the afternoon of a beautiful September day, a heavy two-horse wagon went rumbling along a rocky road in the beautiful Ozark country of Missouri. Two men were riding in the spring seat, while behind them in the wagon box a trunk jostled heavily about.

The man who did the driving was a big, husky-looking fellow; dressed in a hickory shirt, jeans pants, a white, broad-brimmed hat, and coarse, high-top boots. He drove on, with his eyes resting listlessly on the team, taking no interest in the natural beauty around him. Unlike the driver, the other man, who was younger and seemed by manner and dress to be from a different world, took a lively interest in the rugged scenery.

The road was a rocky, winding one, such as is common in the Ozarks. As the wagon rolled heavily over the stones it came to a sharp bend. The scene which lay before them caused the younger man to give vent to an expression of delight.

"How beautiful! And is this the old Spring Creek Mill of which I have heard so much?"

"Yep," grunted his companion, without so much as looking up. As the horses waded out into the clear, sparkling water of Spring Creek, he pulled them down to a standstill and, climbing down from his seat, he walked out on the wagon tongue and loosened the bridle reins so the horses might drink. During the pause the young man was busy feasting his eyes on the wild beauty before him.

On the edge of the little stream was an old-fashioned water mill; the water was rushing madly over its idle wheel and forming a white-capped whirlpool at its base. The mill was old and weather-beaten, and looked as if many years had passed since its days of usefulness. Just behind it rose a hill studded with protruding

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rocks of large size and crowned with great oak trees. As the young man gazed upon the lonely but beautiful scene he little dreamed what a great part this old mill would play in his own life.

The horses finished drinking, the driver again reined them up, climbed back into the seat, and they resumed the journey. As they left the little stream behind, the road turned to the right, so as to avoid ascending the hill, and wound up through the valley. After two or three miles had been slowly covered they began to ascend a long hill, at the foot of which a little spring gushed forth, giving life to a small stream which wended its way through field and woodland to join Spring Creek. As they proceeded up the hill the young man saw a rude-looking log house about half way up, and when they arrived at this point the driver stopped his team and said, "Hayr 's yer place, mister." Getting down, he took the heavy trunk upon his back and transferred it to the porch. After receiving a two-dollar bill for his services, and bidding the younger man good-bye, he got back into the

wagon and was soon gone. Before the man on the porch had time to knock, the door opened and a volley of words greeted him.

"Howdy, mister; come right in and take a cheer. So you 're the new skeul teacher, I 'low. Wall, we 're shore 'nuff tickled ter see ye, fer we 've heered so much erbout ye."

Thus did Ray Jones, the new school teacher of Spring Creek school (for such was our new acquaintance) hear himself greeted by Mrs. Simpson, a short and rather fat woman of perhaps fifty years of age.

"Mr. Cole writ ter Phil Nettles ter git ye a bordin' place, so he come over hayr ter git us ter take ye. Phil sed Mr. Cole sed yer would n't be hard ter please, so I tole him ter send yer on, an' we 'd do the best we could fer ye."

This she was saying as she vigorously dusted a chair with her apron and offered it to the teacher.

"I 'low yer know Mr. Cole kep' skeul hayr once," she continued, without giving him a chance to speak. "We all tho't a powerful site of him. He knowed a heap 'bout books, but he

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never tried ter show off what he knowed; he wus jist as common as any of us folks on Spring Crick. It 'll be mighty hard fer yer ter tak' his place, fer we all loved him so."

She went on with a seriousness that made the new teacher somehow feel the power the old teacher had over these simple people of the hills. He knew and loved Mr. Cole himself, for he felt that he was a sincere man in all that he did; and in coming to these hills to teach he had come with an earnest desire to help the hill folks, and not to benefit himself financially by the salary that was promised for his services. As the new teacher thought of this, a certain sense of shame filled his soul, for his purpose in accepting the position as teacher was not the one that prompted the former teacher; he had to confess to himself that it was a rather selfish motive that had brought him to that community.

He was just from a college, which he had been compelled to quit in the midst of his course on account of the lack of money. His father was a minister, serving a small charge in Southern Illinois, and, of course, was unable to help

his son. Young Jones had an ambition to gain wealth and fame, and had decided to study law as the quickest and easiest way to realize his ambition. The meagerness of his father's income, and the apparent carelessness of the Church in this respect, had caused this spirited young man to crush whatever desire he might have had to serve humanity, and had created within him a purpose to look out for his own interests, regardless of others. So he had come to teach the Spring Creek school for the sake of the salary which would help him in his struggle for the goal of his ambition.

"Yer 'll hav' ter mak' yerself ter hum, fer I 've got ter see 'bout gittin' supper," said Mrs. Simpson, as she finally noticed that her guest seemed to be taken up with his own thoughts and was not paying much attention to her. One remark of the woman's had strangely troubled the young man: "It 'll be mighty hard fer yer ter tak' his place, fer we all loved him so." But what did he care how much they loved the former teacher? It was not their love that he wanted, but their money.

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Throwing aside these thoughts, the young man arose and went out on the porch. The sun had just dropped down behind the trees that crowned the hill on the other side of the valley; the soft, pale light was gradually fading from the sky, and the shadows were deepening in the vale below. The day had been a warm one for September, but already the fresh, damp air from the little creek below was stealing up the hillside, giving one a feeling that autumn was near at hand. Insects were lazily droning their songs, and down on the bank of the stream a big bull-frog was lavishly spending his energy in an unnecessary effort to be heard above the rest. From somewhere on the hill above, the master heard the shrill voice of some one weirdly chanting something unintelligible to the tune of "Arkansaw Traveler." As he listened the voice came nearer; and, peering into the twilight in the direction from whence the sound came, he saw the figure of a man approaching. As he caught sight of the master, the singing ceased, but the man came on up the path toward the porch. He slowly seated himself on the porch,

and the master took an inventory glance at him. He was clothed in the coarse, home-made clothing which was customary for these men of the hills to wear; he was tall and loosely built. The face was what held one's attention; he could not have been more than twenty-one, and yet his face showed signs of premature old age, it had such a worn, tired expression; and the eyes were ever roving about, as if looking for some long-expected calamity.

"I 'low yer ain't seed the devil, hev' ye?" It was a strange, weird voice that uttered these words, as the roving eyes looked at the teacher suspiciously. On receiving a negative reply he went on: "Wall, yer see the reason I ast, he's lookin' fer me, an' I 'm spendin' my time keepin' outer his way."

"What is your name?" asked the master, kindly.

"The' all call me Crazy Jake, but I ain't crazy," was the reply. "I 'm jist keepin' outer the way o' the devil, an' thet's a good site more 'n the're doin' thet call me crazy. Mister Cole sed the devil never ketched them thet kep'

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outer his path, an' I 'm tryin' my best not ter git in hit. I wus ketched by him once, an' I never want ter be agin. Hit wus down by the ole mill whar he got me. Him an' his imps stays 'round there a heep at nights. Do n't yer ever go down thar after dark, mister, fer he might git ye like he did me."

At this juncture in his oft-repeated experience with the devil, Mrs. Simpson appeared in the doorway to announce supper. Seeing Jake, she said: "W'y, what air ye doin' down hayr, Jake? Come ter see the new teacher, I 'low. How air ye an' the devil makin' hit these days?"

Then, without waiting for an answer from Jake, she turned to the teacher and said: "This is ole man Whiteside's boy. The' 're neighbors of ourn. Wall, supper 's ready at las'. Come on in an' eat, Jake." She spoke this last to the latter as she saw him moving away.

"Naw; I cain't. I jist come down ter see Joe a little while." And with that he shuffled off toward the barn.

Ray followed his hostess into a long, low lean-to on the back of the log structure, which

served as kitchen and dining-room combined. Here he was introduced to a buxom girl of nineteen, who blushed furiously as the elderly lady said: "This is my gal, Lou. My son Joe 'll be in purty soon. He ain't done his feedin' yet, so we 'll not wait on him. Take that cheer over there, teacher."

Ray obeyed, sat down in the chair indicated, and began to partake of the rough fare upon which these hill folks lived: bacon, potatoes, bread, coffee, and some home-canned fruit for dessert. As he ate he noticed with dissatisfaction the shy glances which Lou bestowed upon him. Mrs. Simpson talked all through the meal and only permitted him to speak in monosyllables when she was inquiring into some of his past life. As the meal was almost finished the door opened and a timid young man came in, whom the hostess introduced as her son Joe. He sat down to the table and began at once to devour the food, never speaking or looking up from his plate.

After supper was over, the master arose and again went out on the porch. A big autumn

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moon was just peeping over the eastern hill, and its silvery rays were slipping down the hillside into the valley, dispelling the shadows that a little while ago had hidden its beauty. Soon the whole valley seemed a wonderful fairyland as it became thoroughly saturated with the moonlight. For a long time the young man stood drinking in the mysterious beauty of the valley.

"Yer bed 's ready ef yer wanter go ter bed," came a voice from the doorway.

Ray turned and beheld the blushing face of Lou as she held a lamp above her head. The light fell full on her face, showing every feature distinctly. While there was not a trace of refinement or culture about it, still it was a face that would cause one to take a second look, for it seemed to show signs of natural intelligence and of useful power as yet unawakened.


"That 's yer room," she said, pointing to a half-opened door leading from the big room into a small bedroom.

As he entered, his heart sank within him. The floor and walls were bare, and the only furnishings were an old-fashioned bureau, a rough

table, a straight-backed chair, and over in one corner was a single bed. Was this to be his retreat when he wanted to be alone with his books or his thoughts? He remembered his own room at home, and thought of how often he had murmured because of its plainness. Now, as he mentally compared it with the one in which he was standing, it seemed a real palace. Oh, how he longed to be at home at that moment! He hurriedly went to bed, for he knew that if he allowed himself to think of home, he could never stand it to stay in these hills, among these horribly ignorant people. Far away in the night he heard the hoot of an owl. He resolutely shut his eyes and was soon asleep.

CHAPTER II

THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

T is strange how a few hours of sound sleep will blot out the little unpleasant feelings we have. Ray Jones had gone to bed feeling homesick and a little bit worried over the words that Mrs. Simpson had spoken concerning the hard proposition he had on hand in trying to fill Mr. Cole's place in the heart of this people. The next morning as he arose after a sound sleep he could think of home without having his heart try to choke him, and as he thought over the words of the woman they had no effect on his spirits. It was foolish for him to deal in sentiment; this was a business proposition with him; he would teach their school in an acceptable manner, they should pay him his salary, and at the end of the school term he would leave them, perhaps never

to see them again, as he felt sure that if it was necessary for him to teach again he would be able to secure a position in some town, or at least some more enlightened community. Why should he have the social or moral welfare of this community at heart? They were nothing to him, and perhaps, if he tried to help them, they would not appreciate it. Had not his father given the very best part of his life to an unappreciative people? What had it done for him? Successful men of the world looked upon him as a failure. Of course, his father thought he was a success because he was doing faithfully what he felt was his duty. His father's failure would not be repeated by him if it lay in his power to prevent it, and he had great confidence in his ability to do whatever he undertook.

When he went out to breakfast he found it awaiting him. He sat down alone to the coarse fare, as the family had eaten very early, that Joe might get an early start in the field. After he had eaten he began to get ready for his initiation as teacher of Spring Creek School. When he was finally ready to start to the school-

house, which was more than a mile from the Simpson home, he remembered that he had never been there, and did not know in which direction to start. He inquired of Mrs. Simpson the way, and that good lady replied: "It 's ruther a hard place ter find fer one who hain't 'quainted with ther hills and hollers. I 'low Lou had better go 'long an' show yer, so yer won't git lost."

"I 'm sure I can find it if you will but give me a few directions." He did not want to appear so dependent. But Lou, without paying any attention to his words of protest, was already throwing a wrap on as she started for the door. Ray could do nothing but follow her. Together they went down the hill, she a little in advance. They passed the spring, and when they came to the little stream he offered to assist her over the foot-log. Ignoring the offered assistance, she walked nimbly across, waiting for him on the other side. As he joined her she set out, again in advance of him, without saying a word. The silence was becoming very embarrassing to the young man, so he tried to

think of something to talk about. He began with the weather, the dear old stand-by with us all; but this did not seem to interest her, so he tried to question her about the school; but she " 'lowed he 'd find out all erbout that when he 'd teached a spell." Finally, despairing of engaging her in conversation, he gave it up and turned his attention to his surroundings. They had crossed the narrow valley and were climbing the hill; they passed up its side and entered the woods by a path. The leaves on the trees were still green, and as the sunlight sifted down through them it spread a soft glow over the dark earth beneath. As they walked along the path it seemed to Ray that he had never come so near seeing his Creator as that day in that beautiful outdoor temple. The soft light that filled the woods seemed to be a heavenly gleam. The silence that brooded over all seemed to be that great silent Spirit that has always been in the world to guide men in His mysterious manner. A voice as soft as a summer breeze, and yet distinct, spoke to him out of the silence, "My son, follow Me; the path of duty lies in these hills."

He started up suddenly. Who had spoken? Not the girl who walked stolidly on before him. He looked around him, as if he expected to see some one at his side. Then the thought struck him, "It's the hills that are calling; God is moving them to do it." The soft earth under his feet seemed to spring upward with life.

"The' 's goin' ter be an apple peelin' over at Whitesides t'morer night, an' they tole me ter bring ye along ef yer 'd come." It was Lou's voice this time, and it brought him back to earth quickly. She had not turned as she spoke, but he was sure she must be blushing.

"Will yer go?" she said, as she had waited in vain for his answer.

"Yes," for he felt that there was no other way out but to promise.

"The' shore do hev good times at them apple peelin's. Everybody comes from all 'round." She seemed to speak with perfect freedom. At last a subject had been started that she was interested in. "The' always play games after the apples 's all peeled. I 'd heep ruther play old miller 'an anything. Did yer ever play

hit?" She turned and looked at her companion for the first time during their little walk.

"No. How is it played?"

"Hit's easy as can be. Yer jist choose a pardner and then jine the ring around the feller 'at ain't got nary 'n', an' everybody marches round him an' sings, an' when the' holler 'Grab!' yer got ter git anuther pardner in a hurry, er the feller in the ring 'll beat ye, an' then yer 'd hafter be hit."

As she concluded the description of the game her face was all aglow with pleasure. It was one of the few great social events of her simple life, and she grew full of enthusiasm as she thought and talked of it.

"Thar's the skeulhouse," she said, as they came to the edge of a clearing, in the center of which stood a small frame building. "I'll be goin' back now;" and she bounded back into the woods like a young faun.

The teacher approached the building, unlocked the door, and went in. It was furnished with long, wooden benches, with desks on the back of each. A table stood in one corner by

a window. He took the chair standing nearby and seated himself by the table to await the coming of his pupils. He had not long to wait, for they soon began to come in. There were boys and girls of all sizes and ages. The boys were nearly all dressed in very coarse, home-made clothing; the girls in calico or gingham. He nodded to each of them as they came. They gathered in groups around the room and eyed him suspiciously. It made him feel very uncomfortable, but he tried not to pay any attention. As he pretended to straighten up the table he tried to smile at them, but there was no response, and he gave it up. He rapped on his desk as a signal that it was time to begin. With a shuffling of rough-shod feet they took their seats. When all were quiet the master arose and said:

“Boys and girls, we have come here this morning to begin a new term of school, and I am sure that it is the desire of all your parents that you apply yourselves and learn as much as possible. I am your teacher, and it is my purpose to direct you in this effort as best I can.”

He paused and looked over the schoolroom to note the effect of his words. There was a lack of interest on the part of all save a girl who sat near the door. He had not noticed her before. He had not seen her come in. She alone seemed to listen. As he looked at her she returned a look from frank blue eyes, and he thought he saw a faint smile of encouragement linger for a moment around those eyes. He turned and looked in another direction, and continued:

"I have no rules to lay down, but will consider you all model pupils until you give me cause to think otherwise. You will please give me your names on a slip of paper, so I can enter them in the register." As he looked at the little faces in the front row he realized that he had blundered. He was sure an amused smile was going the rounds. He dared not look up for a moment, he was so confused. Presently he said: "You may tell me your names and how old you are as I point you out," indicating the children on the front row by a nod of the head in their direction.

"First little boy," pointing to a little black-headed fellow, "what is your name?"

"Ben Westwood."

"How old are you?"

"Dunno."

Before the teacher had time to say anything further, a big, overgrown boy in the back part of the house spoke out sullenly:

"He 's old 'nuff ter come to skeul, er his mammy would n't 'a' sent him."

For a moment the teacher was taken off his guard by the sudden interference, but only for a moment. He knew that now was the time to show who was going to run the school.

"Will you please come forward?" he said, addressing the big boy. There was something in his voice that made the boy obey. As he stood before the master he seemed angry with himself for having obeyed. He looked defiantly at the teacher. The latter returned a firm, fearless one as he spoke:

"I had no desire to begin the new term by punishing any of you, but you have shown a disrespect for myself and the school by speaking

in the way you did, and I am compelled to punish you. As this is the first offense, I will not be too severe. You may stand in that corner until recess." Ray could see that a struggle for supremacy was near, and he prepared himself for it. The boy made no motion to obey this last order; so the teacher spoke again:

"Take your place in that corner."

The only answer was a defiant look from those sullen gray eyes. Without any hesitation the master took him by the collar and pushed him toward the corner. The boy shook himself free and struck at the teacher; the latter, seeing the blow coming, quickly stepped aside, letting it pass harmlessly by. So much force was in it that the boy was completely overbalanced and fell sprawling over the chair from which the teacher had just arisen. Before he had time to pick himself up, Ray had seized him by the collar and dragged him to the corner.

"Stand there until I tell you to move!" he said, as the boy slowly got on his feet. He was so ashamed of his failure to whip the teacher that he obeyed without a word.

Ray felt that the incident had established him fully as master of the school. Recess came, and the pupils filed out into the yard. The master turned from his desk to where the conquered pupil was still standing.

"You may go out with the rest, Tom," he said, kindly. The boy went out without a word.


It was with a feeling of satisfaction that Ray walked to the door and stood looking out at the boys and girls at play. He knew that, since Tom Westwood was a leader, in conquering him he had conquered the whole school. As he let his eyes wander over the schoolyard he saw the young woman who had listened to him so attentively when he was addressing the school that morning. He had found her name to be Roxy Nettles. She was the daughter of one of the directors of the school. She sat on the grass under a tree. A book lay open before her, but she was not reading. She was watching the children at play and seemed to be getting as much enjoyment in watching as they were in playing. She was different from any one he had met since his coming into this community,

and yet she seemed somehow to fit perfectly amid her rude surroundings. She was far in advance of all the other pupils in school work, and she had shown a refined manner that had utterly surprised Ray. He rang the bell for books, wondering what her home life was, for he felt that there must be the explanation of it all.

Ray was glad when the time for dismissal came, for it had been a trying day on him. As he walked back to his boarding place the homesickness had returned. He wanted to quit and go back home and leave these ignorant people. But just then he seemed to see two frank blue eyes with the shadow of a smile in their depths, and he thought they are not all ignorant.

CHAPTER III

THE APPLE PEELING

 HE next day dawned clear and beautiful. Ray arose with the sun. He walked down to the spring, and after taking a long, cold draught from its sparkling depth he sat down on a stone and looked around him. Everywhere he looked was beauty, natural beauty, God's handiwork. Why that noble hill over yonder, this fertile valley, these stately trees, and this bubbling spring? "For man," came the answer, "the noblest of all God's creation." But amid all this there lived a people that were ignorant and shiftless. Why not a better class amid such blessings? God knows no class; all men are dear to His great eternal heart. It is the duty of those who know to impart knowledge to those who do not know. Such were Ray's thoughts as he sat there that beautiful morning. And then he remem-

bered the voice that spoke to him the previous day, and somehow his duty to these hill folks was made very plain to him. His thoughts were broken by the sound of a horse's hoof-beat. He arose and looked up the hill, and saw a man riding a big roan horse coming in his direction. It was John Whiteside, a brother to Crazy Jake. As he came opposite to where the teacher was standing he stopped his horse, shifted a quid of tobacco from one side of his mouth to the other, spat, and then said:

“Howdy, mister.”

Ray returned the salutation. John spoke again:

“I ’low yer the new teacher I ’ve heerd ’bout?”

Ray nodded.

“Jake sed he seen ye the night yer come. He ’s been tellin’ us whut a fin’-lookin’ feller yer be, an’ I ’ve been powerful anxious ter git a squint at ye.” He was looking Ray over from head to foot curiously.

“I ’ll be busted ef he ain’t just ’bout right in his way o’ thinkin’ this time.”

Ray was beginning to get red in the face, for he was not accustomed to such frank expressions of admiration. John paid no attention to his embarrassment, but went on speaking:

"Yer see," shifting his quid and ejecting a very dark stream from his mouth, "Jake ain't jist as smart as he might be. I 'low yer tuk notice to that t' other evening', but he's got more good hoss sense than the folks 'round hayr give him credit fer."

Ray was anxious to know more about the mysterious brother, and as he saw John preparing to start he said:

"Why does your brother seem to fear the devil so much?"

There was a peculiar gleam in John's eyes now; he had lost the look of careless curiosity. After a moment's hesitation he spoke.

"Hain't ye heerd 'bout hit? I 'lowed Simpsons had tole ye afore this."

"No, they have n't told me anything about him."

"Wall, mister, hit's jist this way; we uns do n't know much 'bout hit ourselves, fer he

wus never able ter tell jist whut happened ter him; we 've got our idee 'bout hit, uv course. Jake never wus very strong in his head, but yer could n't call him crazy. One day he come home jist as wild as a catamount and sed the devil hed ketched him an' tied him ter a tree an' stuck a big fork in him. Thar wus marks on his arms an' legs like he 'd bin tied, an' holes in his clo'es whar the blood wus runnin' through. Thet 's all we uns know 'bout hit fer shore, but hit ain't all we 're goin' ter know 'bout hit, fer ef God gives me strength I 'm goin' ter hunt them devils down an' pay 'em fer hit." Fire flashed from his eyes as he spoke this last, and he brought his fist down on the saddle-horn with such force that it jarred the horse.

"I 'low hit 's time I wus goin'," he said, abruptly, and giving his horse a kick in the side, he started on.

Ray hastened toward the house, for it was not long till school time, and he had not had his breakfast.

It was not long until the master found himself in the little schoolhouse again. The day

was an uneventful one. The affair with Tom Westwood had, as Ray expected, settled the matter of supremacy. The pupils, with one accord, had settled down into meek submission. All was quiet save the customary schoolroom hum occasioned by the moving of many lips in study, the scraping of rough shoes upon the floor, or the scratching of a pencil as it was pushed along the slate by sturdy little fingers.

Many times through the day Ray had thought of the invitation he had received to attend the apple peeling, and wished he might withdraw his acceptance. He knew it would never do to make these people feel that he was holding himself aloof from them; so by the time school was out in the afternoon he had fully decided to go, regardless of his wishes in the matter.

When he arrived at the Simpson home he found supper awaiting him. All the work had been done, and Joe and Lou were dressed in their gala-day attire. He was surprised to know that they were going so early in the evening, but said nothing. He hurriedly ate his supper,

and very soon after found himself with the two young persons on the road to Whiteside's. It is needless to say the walk was a silent one, for, try as he would, he could not engage either the sister or brother in conversation.

When they arrived at the Whiteside home they were greeted in true backwoods style. Joe simply announced to Old Man Whiteside, who met them at the door, that this was the new teacher. Their host grasped Ray's hand and worked his arm up and down as if it was a pump-handle, while he looked him over as if he was a horse that he was thinking of trading. He then led the way to a big room, where some of the guests had already assembled.

"This hayr is the new skeul teacher," he announced in a very loud voice. "I 'low ye 've all heered uv him 'fore this. 'Specially the gals," he added, giving Ray a familiar punch in the ribs. This sally of wit brought loud "haw-haws" from the young men and giggles from the young women. Ray felt very much embarrassed and not a little displeased with his rude old host.

"Now yer 'll jist hev ter make yerselves ter

hum, fer I 've got ter be out an' see that the rest uv 'em git in." And the old man went out.

Ray seated himself in one corner of the room, so that he would be as unnoticed as possible. Lou sat not far away. Every time he looked in her direction he caught her staring at him. Every one was as silent as if they were at a funeral instead of a place of merry-making. Ray felt that his coming into their midst had cast a spell over them. At last the silence was broken by the arrival of new guests. Among the new arrivals were two young men who seemed to be pals, and yet they were as unlike as could be. The larger one of the two was a typical man of the hills. His face was not bad-looking, save for the bestial-looking eyes. The other was of slighter build and had an intelligent face. One could tell at first sight that he was not a native of that country. As he smilingly looked around the room he caught sight of the teacher and came toward him with extended hand as he said:

"You are Mr. Jones, the new teacher, I believe."

Ray arose and took his hand.

"Your name is on everybody's tongue in this community just at present. You know that any one coming from the outer world into this out-of-the-way place causes a great deal of comment."

Ray could not help being pleased with the young man, he had such a pleasant manner.

"My name is Carson—Samuel Carson," he continued, "and this is my friend Rupert. Come here, Bill, and shake hands with Mr. Jones." The other young man came forward at the invitation and shook Ray's hand rather awkwardly.

Just here old Whiteside came in to announce that everything was ready for the apple peeling to begin. A rush was made for the other room across the big open hall. That room was much like the other. The furniture had all been removed and benches had been placed around the wall. In the middle of the floor was a great pile of golden apples. Everybody was given a pan or dish of some kind and a case-knife. Then, amid much loud talk and laughter, the work began in earnest. As Ray looked across the

room he saw Roxy Nettles. She had not been in the other room. He noticed that she entered into the affair with as much spirit as any of those present. She saw him looking at her, and as their eyes met a smile and a nod came his way. He turned himself to the apples in the pan he held and began to work in earnest. He felt a certain repressed excitement in the crowd, but was unable to explain it. At last it burst forth in a shout from all. He looked up from the apple he was peeling and saw Lou advancing toward him with a big red apple in her hand. Before he could realize what was in the air, she had stooped down and kissed him on the lips. Then she rushed back to her seat, bashfully hiding her face in her hands. The hot blood mounted to his cheeks, and anger filled his heart. He was about to rise and resent it in words, when he felt a tug at his sleeves and a low voice speaking in his ear.

“Don’t mind that, Mr. Jones. It’s the custom whoever finds a red apple gets to kiss whoever they desire.”

Ray turned and saw the smiling face of Sam

Carson. No one else had foreseen his move, and none had heard the admonition. He settled back in his seat obediently, for on second thought he had decided it was best not to show his feelings. Presently a young man produced a red apple and claimed his reward from the lips of a blushing young girl. Before the pile had disappeared several had been rewarded in like manner.

After the apples were all peeled, games became the order of the evening. Ray joined in rather reluctantly. He wondered how Carson could enter into it all so heartily. He seemed to be a man of refined taste, and yet he looked as if he was enjoying himself as much as any one in the room. As Ray watched him he somehow felt as though there was a vein of insincerity about him. At any rate, he was winning favor with the people with his smiling face and gracious manners.

"Git yer pardners fer 'Ole Miller!" a voice rang out, amid the din of laughing and shouting, and the teacher knew that Lou's favorite game was about to be played.

"Git a pardner, teacher," yelled Old Man Whiteside from one corner of the room, where he was watching the young folks. "Do n't yer see all these purty gals jist waitin' fer ye ter ast 'em?"

Ray looked around quickly for some one to ask, for he did not want to have the old man display any more wit at his expense. His eyes fell on Roxy, who was standing by the doorway, alone. How beautiful and pure she looked, clad in a neat gingham dress, her wavy golden hair combed back from her white forehead and caught up at the back of her head with a blue ribbon that matched her beautiful eyes in color, and her fair young face tinted with the flush of health! She seemed to him like a beautiful flower wasting its sweetness on the desert air. He moved toward her; she seemed to anticipate his coming, for she turned to him with an encouraging smile.

"Miss Roxy, will you give me the pleasure?" he said, offering his arm.

"Certainly," she replied, sweetly, as she laid a small hand on the offered arm.

Together they walked into the middle of the room and joined the circle. They were soon whirling around the room in a merry way. Ray found, to his surprise, that he was having a good time. After the game had lasted until every one was tired and was ready to quit, Ray took Roxy to a seat, and as he sat down beside her she looked into his eyes and said:

“Did you like it?”

“Yes, very much. It is the only real fun I’ve had this evening.”

“I’m glad you did, for you seemed not to enjoy the other games, especially the apple peeling.” A merry smile played about her face as she spoke the last.

“Well, I must say I was somewhat surprised when the young lady kissed me.”

“Oh, I hope you won’t let that give you a bad impression of us, for it is the custom here and is never thought anything of. I see the crowd is getting ready to leave, so I must find my brothers and go too.” Then, as she rose, she said, “Won’t you come to see us soon?”

"When shall I come?" He had arisen also, and stood beside her.

"Any time you care to. The teacher comes whenever he pleases in this neighborhood."

"I will come soon."

"We will look for you. Good-bye." And she left him.

He found his host and, after bidding him good-night, set out for home alone, for Joe had gone and, to his delight, he saw John Whiteside starting out with Lou.

As he trudged down the hill that crisp autumn night he little dreamed that the fire that was to refine him had been kindled.

CHAPTER IV

A SABBATH DAY AT UNCLE JIM'S



ABOUT a half mile up Spring Creek above the old mill stood a little log house. The rough logs were almost concealed in the spring and summer by ivy and climbing roses. Just in front of the house was a vegetable and flower garden combined, which extended to the creek. At the back was a five-acre lot, fenced in with a rail-fence, where small patches of potatoes and corn were raised. All around the little home the spirit of peace hovered.

In this peaceful little haven dwelt James Watkins and his good wife Susan. They were known throughout the neighborhood as Uncle Jim and Aunt Sue. The old man had run the mill many years until rheumatism had stricken him and for a while had made him almost helpless; the mill had been closed during that time.

At last, when he was able to open it again, he found that the people who had formerly patronized him had become accustomed to have their grinding done at a little mill near the store at Spring Bluff. It would take some time to win them back, and then he might not be able to run it very long, as he was getting old; so he thought best not to open up again. He tilled the five-acre field, and with the vegetables his wife raised in the garden and the eggs their fowls furnished they were supplied with all the necessities of life. Uncle Jim often said: "We 're only temporary hayr anyhow, and some day we 're goin' ter be set up permanent in the City uv God; so what 's the use uv stewin' an' frettin' eround ter lay things up in this world." The old couple never left their home unless some minister happened to preach at the schoolhouse, which was not often. They would always go to hear him. Uncle Jim would hitch up old Selim and drive to the post-office and store every Saturday to get the mail and buy the few groceries they needed.

About a week after the coming of the schoolmaster, on a beautiful Sabbath morning, Uncle

Jim sat on a bench just outside the door, smoking. Aunt Sue was sitting in the doorway, reading a well-worn Bible. They were both in a thoughtful frame of mind. From where they sat they could look down into the water of the creek as it lay peaceful in the sunlight.

"Mother," the old man was the first to break the silence, "do n't yer think when David writ that Twenty-third Sam he must 'a' been settin' on the bank uv a stream jist like Spring Crick an' on jist sich a day as this 'n'?"

"Mebbe so, father," replied the old lady, as she raised her glasses from her nose and let them rest in her silvery hair.

"Wall, I 'low he must 'a' been, fer as I set hayr lookin' at that water so peaceful, hit makes my heart feel like hit 's goin' ter bust with gladness, fer thar ain't a want in me thet ain't been supplied by the Great Shepherd, an' I feel like sayin' with the samist, 'Bless the Lord, O my soul, an' all thet is within me bless His holy name!'" As he spoke, the old man's face glowed with a heavenly light. "Cain't ye start a hymn, mother? I feel like singin' now."

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The old lady cleared her voice and in a trembling but sweet tone began:

O for a heart to praise my God;
A heart from sin set free;
A heart that always feels Thy blood
So freely split for me.

Scarcely had she begun until Uncle Jim struck in with his quavering bass, and so they sang the hymn through; their voices floated away down the creek on the breezes; their spirits melted in the radiant sunlight of the Heavenly Father's love.

"I wonder who that is comin' up the crick?" said the old man after they had finished the song. He was shading his eyes as he looked at the approaching stranger.

The old lady arose, wiped her eyes with her apron, came out of the doorway, and stood beside her husband.

"I can't somehow make him out," continued he.

"Mebbe hit's that young feller Carson, whut stays up at Rupert's," she suggested.

"No, 't aint him, fer I 've seed him 'nuff ter

know him, an' I shore do n't know thet feller thet 's comin'."

By this time the stranger was near the house, and as he seemed to hesitate about coming any further, Uncle Jim hailed him in his usual hearty manner:

"Howdy, stranger! Come right in and rest a spell. Mother, bring out a cheer. Hit 's a site pleasanter out hayr than in the house." The old lady obeyed, and as soon as the man was seated the host said:

"I 'low ye do n't live 'round these parts. Do n't think I ever seed ye afore."

"No, sir; this is not my home, but I 'm staying here at present. My name is Jones. I 'm the new teacher of the school up on the hill."

The old man started up in surprise, then settled back in his seat and chuckled as he said:

"So yer the teacher, air ye? Well, I heered 'bout that little fracas yer had with that big Westwood boy. We 're powerful glad thet ye come ter see us. Hain't we, mother?" He

turned to his wife, who was standing beside the bench on which he sat.

"Yes, Mister Jones, we 're allas glad ter have folks come ter see us." And as she spoke she beamed down on the teacher with a motherly smile that won him to the old lady at once.

"I was just taking a stroll, it being such a beautiful day, and as I was standing down by the mill I heard singing. It sounded so much like home, I thought I would find out where it came from." And then he went on as if to explain, "My father is a minister, and we are accustomed to sing that hymn which you were just singing."

"So yer a minister's son. Wall, I 'low ye must miss the meetin' to-day," said the old man. "'T ain't often out hayr thet yer 'll git ter attend a meetin', but mebbe sence yer a preacher's son ye can preach fer us sometimes at the skeul-house. We 'd be powerful glad ter hev yer do hit."

"I do n't think I could hardly do that, as I have never had any experience in that line."

"I 'lowed mebbe ye 'd wanter foller in yer

father's footsteps, and wus goin' ter be a preacher some day, fer the' ain't nuthin' grander than preachin' the gospel. Sometimes I feel as if I 'd ourghter done hit myself, an' then I think how foolish hit 'ud be fer a ign'rant old man like me to do sich a thing. We hed a boy thet 'peared ter me like he 'd ourghter preach, but God did n't see hit thet way."

Ray noticed that at this point in the old man's speech the old lady turned and went into the house. Uncle Jim, as if realizing he was touching on forbidden ground, abruptly said:

"Ef yer ain't goin' any place in perticlar, teacher, ye might jist as wall spend the day with us."

"I shall be glad to accept your invitation if it will not give your wife any extra trouble in getting dinner."

"Hit won't be any trouble, but a r'al pleasure. Mebbe we 'd better go in the house now, fer I 'low I 've set our hayr too long fer my own good. Hit 's sich a temptin' day ter set out in the open, but the air is a bit too chilly fer my rheumatiz."

Ray followed the old man into the house, and as he looked around him he saw the almost perfect neatness of the arrangement of the room. The floor was bare save for some home-made rugs that lay upon its spotless surface. On the whitewashed walls hung some old-fashioned pictures. One that held his attention a moment was that of a boy just ready to enter manhood. Ray thought it must be the son, of whom the old man had spoken. All the furniture was very plain, but was so arranged that it gave the room a homelike appearance.

The two sat opposite each other before an old fireplace in which some red coals were glowing. The old man slowly refilled his pipe and, taking a coal from the hearth, laid it carefully on the tobacco and began to puff. The young man had sat silent, watching the operation. As soon as the smoke began to roll out of his mouth in great puffs, Uncle Jim withdrew the stem from his mouth and addressed the teacher:

"So yer do n't aim ter preach? Mebbe yer goin' ter teach all yer life?"

The question came so pointedly it made the young man wince just a little.

"No, I do n't intend to do either. My ambition is to become a lawyer."

"Um-huh," said the old man, reflectively, taking the pipe from his lips when he had taken another puff. "Wall, I ain't got nuthin' agin lawyers, fer we 've got ter have 'em, I 'low; but 'cordin' ter my way of thinkin' we got sumpin' else ter do 'cept hangin' 'round a courthouse tryin' ter see how much trouble we can rake up so 's ter git a little money out'n hit."

"Well, I feel that I would like to have a little of this world's goods and make a name for myself. Every young man ought to have an ambition to rise in the world," said the teacher, trying to defend himself.

"I 'low I hain't got none o' these new-fangled notions 'bout sich things, but 'hit 'pears ter me as ef this ambition yer talkin' uv is jist whut 's ruinin' the world. Most folks air runnin' arter the things uv the world nowadays, an' God an' His Kingdom air bein' powerful neglected. The thing we wantter do mos' ain't allus

the thing we 'd ourghter do. Jist look at this neighborhood right hayr on Spring Crick; all kinds uv sin goin' on all the time, an' mos'ly 'cause these folks ain't got nobody ter larn 'em how ter do differ'nt; an' I 'low this is jist one uv many places in thet fix. Ef some folks whut 's got ther talent hid away would jist be willin' ter take hit outen hits hidin' place an' come out hayr an' use it, I 'low he 'd be makin' a name fer hissself thet 'u'd never die, an' a fortune thet 'ud be everlastin'." The old man paused and looked at the teacher, who was listening attentively, showing no signs of the inward struggle that had been caused by the words of the honest old soul. After knocking the ashes out of his pipe and laying it upon the mantle, Uncle Jim went on in a way that was torture to the young man's soul:

"Yer see I laid a heap uv faith in yer bein' able to do a lot uv good fer this place. Yer young an' smart, an' had the right kind uv raisin'. Hit 'pears ter me as ef yer jist the one God wants ter help us hill folks. Mister Cole done lots, but he had ter leave us." At that

moment Aunt Sue came in and announced that dinner was ready.

The three sat down to the simple meal. Uncle Jim reverently thanked the Heavenly Father "fer His bounteous blessin's." There seemed to be such perfect contentment in his heart that it was a silent rebuke for Ray when he thought of how he had complained against his own lot.


The old man appeared as if he was satisfied with the manner in which he had delivered himself to the teacher, for all through the remainder of the day he did not again mention the subject of the forenoon. Enough had been said, for, try as he would, Ray could not keep his thoughts from the old man's words, and again he seemed to hear that soft whisper that he had heard on his way to the schoolhouse the first morning. The old man appeared not to notice the silence into which his guest had lapsed, but talked on intermittently through the afternoon.

At last, when the shadows began to grow like the beanstalk of the old fairy-tale, and the breezes were laden with a cool dampness as from

some underground cavern, Ray started up as if from sleep and said it was time for him to go. The old couple pressed him with an invitation to come again. He promised to do so, and went down the creek path. As he came to the mill he stopped and looked at the water tumbling over the idle wheel, and likened it to his own troubled soul. "Must I surrender these ambitions that I have cherished so fondly?" and, looking around as if afraid some one had heard him, he hastened up the valley road.

CHAPTER V

A DECLARATION OF LOVE

 HE beautiful September days dragged slowly along for Ray. The last Friday of the month had come at last, and with it came the first month's salary. As the teacher left the schoolhouse that afternoon, a sudden desire to quit and go back home seized him. He knew that he would be gladly received by his parents, for his mother had written him several times, telling him how they missed him and how much they wished he had a position nearer home, so he could visit them often. He felt sure that he could find something to do near his home. He had money enough to go. Then, why should he stay in a place that was so unpleasant to him? He was just about to decide to hand in his resignation as teacher, when the thought struck him that he was running away from a hard task, and that such a thing would have a tendency to weaken

him in after life. That caused him to change his decision immediately. He would not run away, no matter how unpleasant it might be for him to stay. He would not be a coward, a weakling. He hated the thought of such. As the final decision was made he began to walk rapidly, as if afraid he might again change his mind. When he came to the spring he got down on all fours and began to drink slowly. While he was thus engaged his ear caught the sound of a horse's hoofbeat. Raising himself, he saw John Whiteside coming down the hill on his big roan.

"Good morning!" said Ray. John never so much as turned his head.

The teacher was very much perplexed. He could not understand John's strange action. Undoubtedly he was angry about something; what could it be? Ray had not seen him since the apple peeling, and he was sure that he had not done anything then to make him angry. He walked slowly up the hill to the house. So intent was he thinking about John's refusal to speak that he did not notice Lou pass swiftly

out of the back door as he entered the front. If he had seen her he might have had something else to wonder about, for she usually found occasion to be on the porch or at the gate every evening when he returned. Ray could not help but see that the girl was trying in every possible way to attract him, and he had been doing his best to discourage her in her efforts. On that evening he passed on into his room and dropped wearily into a chair and took up his school register to mark the attendance of the day. As he opened it an envelope dropped out and fell on the floor. Hurriedly picking it up, he examined it. It was addressed to him in a very childish hand, but it bore neither stamp nor post mark. Curious to know its contents, he tore it open and read the following:

“my dere swethart i rite this leter to tel
yu how much i luv yu i kant liv with out yu
i cud git a nuther feller what livs clost by
hear but i dont want nun but yu i hop yu
luv me if yu do yu dont ned to rite it but
jist tel me with lots uv luv an cises i am yor
luing swethart lou”

Ray could scarce believe his eyes when he read it. What did it mean? Surely Lou had not written it. But who else could have done it? At that moment he heard some one enter the other room. He arose and opened the door. As he did so his eyes fell upon the blushing, smiling face of the author of the letter, which he still held in his hand. He stood looking at her for a moment, at a loss to know just how to act in the matter; then anger filled his heart, and he felt like saying something very sharp to her; but as he looked into the girl's eyes he saw an ignorant and darkened soul looking through them, and his anger gave way to pity.

"Lou, did you leave this note in my room?" He had himself well in hand as he spoke.

"Yes," she said, trying to hide her face in her hands.

"Why did you do it?"

" 'Cause I 'lowed hit was the easiest way ter tell ye."

"But don't you know it is very indiscreet in you?"

"In what?" she said, looking up quickly, curiosity written upon her face.

"Indiscreet. Something a lady ought not to do," he tried to explain.

"Wall, I ain't no lady. I 'm jist a plain country gal. Ladies lives in the cities and war fine clo's. I 'lowed I could be one ef yer 'd take me ter the city an' git me the clo's."

"You do n't understand," he said, rather helplessly. "I mean a girl should never write such a note to a man. It does n't look well."

"Oh," she replied, as a light came into her eyes; "I know I do n't write es purty es some folks does, but I 'low, es ye 're a skeul teacher, yer could larn me how."

Ray was almost on the verge of losing his temper, and this time replied rather sharply: "Listen to me; see if you can understand this. I do n't love you, and never could; and I would never think of marrying you."

A look of disappointment stole slowly over the girl's face while he was speaking, and she stared at him open-mouthed, but did not make any rejoinder. As he looked upon her it dawned

upon him that here was a chance to give a poor, ignorant girl some needed advice, and without hesitating he began:

"Lou," he said, kindly, "I am sure you understand me now; so let me tell you something that will help you. God intended that a woman should be the most beautiful creature on earth. Now, when I say 'beautiful' I do n't mean a pretty face and figure, for some of the most beautiful women I have ever seen do not possess either. To be beautiful, then, is to be virtuous, intelligent, modest, gentle, kind, and possess many other such graces. Perhaps you do n't know what all this means," he continued, as he saw a blank expression on her face, "so let me make it more plain; be just as good as you know how to be, and always try to find out how to be better."

The girl listened with deep interest, and when he had finished she said: "I shore wish I could be beautiful; but I 'low the' ain't no use tryin' out hayr in this country, fer if I tried, ever'body 'ud laf an' make fun an' say I was stuck up."

"But you would not need to appear so that people would think so of you." He was very much in earnest now, for he saw in this ignorant girl before him a soul hungering for a higher and better life. At that moment a still voice whispered to him, "How many are there in this community in whom this desire lies unawakened, waiting for some one to speak to them and show them this better life!" He knew the voice; it had spoken to him often of late, pointing out his path of duty all too plain. He was not willing to yield. However, he had determined to help this girl if possible.

"As for knowing how to be good," he continued, "I 'll do all I can to teach you; but knowing is not all there is to being good. The Bible says, 'If ye know these things, happy are ye if you do them.' So if we know how to live, and then do n't do it, we are worse than those who do not know."

Ray's own words seemed to bring condemnation to himself, for he felt sure he was not doing all that he knew to be his duty.

"Wall, ef yer 'll show me how ter live, I 'll

shore try, fer I want ter be what yer call beautiful. What's the fust thing I ourghter do?" She looked up to him as a child might to its parent for instruction. Ray shuddered when he realized how much it meant to show some one how to live acceptable to God; but he had promised to help her, and he determined to do his best.

"The first thing," he replied, "I want you to take the book which I shall give you and study it." He stepped into his room and returned with a book, which he handed to her. "It's a grammar, and will teach you how to use proper language."

She examined it for a moment, and then said: "I uster study this a little at skeul, but did n't think much of hit. I never 'lowed hit had anything ter do with makin' a person beautiful."

"A beautiful woman should speak properly."

"I 'low she ourghter," she replied, as she slowly turned the pages of the book. Then she added: "Mister Jones, I 'low you ain't goin' ter say anything 'bout thet letter I wrote ter you."

Air ye? 'Cause I didn't mean no harm an' never 'lowed it was wrong."

"Indeed, I will not mention it again. And now we shall always be good friends, and I will do all I can to help you be a beautiful woman." As he finished he turned and walked out of the house, leaving the girl poring over the book which he had given her.

As he walked down the valley road his mind was full of the talk he had just had with the girl, and when he thought of how he had led her to see the possibility of her living a higher and better life, and how he had offered to help her, his heart was filled with a strange new peace. He stretched his arms heavenward and, with a voice full of emotion, said: "Oh, Father, if I could only do it! Make me willing." He paused for a moment, looking upward, as if expecting an answer, and then he pushed rapidly on down the road until nightfall reminded him that he had better retrace his steps. When he returned to the house he found the family seated around the supper table.

"We waited fer ye a spell," said Mrs. Simpson.

"I just took a walk and went further than I intended to," replied Ray, absently.

The meal was an unusually quiet one. Ray glanced at Lou and saw that she seemed busy with some serious thoughts, which was unusual for her.

CHAPTER VI

A TROUBLESOME DIRECTOR



OM, air ye larnin' anything ter skeul?" Mr. Westwood said to his son Tom one morning as the two were out in the barn feeding the stock.

"Yas," said the boy, indifferently.

"Wall, what hev ye larnt?" The father stood with the empty corn-basket in his hand, for he had just thrown the last ear of corn to the horses.

The boy looked up with a perplexed look on his face, but did not reply.

"I say, what hev ye larnt? Can't ye understand nuthin'?" This time, as he spoke, he had thrown the basket back into the crib and stood before his son with his hands on his hips and a look of determination on his face. The boy seemed to recognize the position of his father

as one of determination to carry out a purpose, for he replied without further hesitation:

"I—I hev larnt sumpin' 'bout figers an'—some other things," he stammered.

"'Bout figers?" said the father, wagging his head wisely. "Wall, I 'low thet 's 'bout the most important thing ye git outen skeul." Then, putting his hands into his pockets and straightening up rather impressively, he went on: "Yer see, I want yer ter be like yer dad, fer I 'low the' ain't a man in this hayr deestric thet 's better 'n me when hit comes ter figerin'. I was jist a wonderin' ef thet teacher was a-larnin' ye anything. I tole them other d'recters thet I 'bjected ter him, fer I did n't 'low he was much when hit come ter figerin', but they was sot on hevin' him, so I hed ter give in. I 'low I 'll hev ter give ye a few examples ter find out ef yer larnin', fer thet 's the best way."

Tom winced, for he knew that his knowledge of arithmetic was very limited, and here was a test coming. He had learned to respect the teacher, and he knew it was not the teacher's fault that his knowledge of this particular

branch of study was so limited. He also knew that his father disliked the teacher and was persistent in his efforts to arouse a feeling of dissatisfaction in the district against him.

Silas Westwood was a man who would have his way in all things or would cause a great deal of trouble. He was not very popular in the neighborhood because of his overbearing disposition. Although he was very ignorant, there was not any subject too deep for him to discuss. He took especial delight in displaying his knowledge of arithmetic.

"Come on in the house now, an' while yer ma 's gittin' breakfast I wanter see what ye 've larnt ter skeul," he said, as he started toward the house. Tom followed meekly.

"Now take this 'n'," said the father when they were seated beside the great open fireplace. "Ef a man buys three cows fer fifteen dollars a piece, an' sells 'em fer nineteen a piece, how much does he make on 'em?"

The words struck terror to the boy's heart. He began to figure desperately, while his father looked on loftily. After some moments

of silence the boy looked up helplessly and said:

"I 'low I can't git thet 'n'."

"Jist what I 'lowed," replied the father, "but yer ourghter be doin' 'em ef ye had the right kind of a teacher. I 'm goin' up ter visit the skeul ter-day an' see how things is bein' carried on. Hit 's jist as I 'lowed, fer I tole Phil Nettles he 'd be sorry thet he hired thet collige feller."

At this moment Mrs. Westwood, a thin little woman of meek appearance, came to the door leading from the kitchen to the living-room and addressed her husband in a subdued tone, "Silas, breakfast is waitin' ef ye be ready fer hit."

Upon this announcement the father and son went into the kitchen, where the rest of the family were seated around a long pine table. There were five children besides Tom, all younger; among them was Ben, the little fellow who had caused the trouble between Tom and the teacher the first day of school.

As the meal progressed, the head of the household lectured the family on their duties for

the day. "Nancy, I want yer ter sew them buttons on my Sunday coat. The' come off somehow the las' time I hed hit on." He spoke to his wife. "Ben, yer do n't fergit ter slop them hogs 'fore ye go ter skeul; an' Betty, ye be shore an' feed them chickens." And so he went on all through the meal. When he had finished he arose, took down his hat from a peg, and said to his wife:

"I 'low I 'll tend the skeul ter-day, as I hain't got nuthin' special ter do; an' I jist got an' idy hit needs lookin' after, jedgin' from the way Tom's gittin' on in his books."

"But, Silas, I 'lowed ye go ter the store ter-day, fer them aigs ourghter be tuk, an' we need some things mighty bad," remonstrated the wife.

"I sed I was a-goin' ter the skeul," snapped the husband. "Ain't I a d'recter, an' ain't hit my business ter see thet things is run right; an' ef I see thet things is a-goin' wrong, an' do n't go an' tend ter hit, ain't I 'sponsible? Hit's a d'recter's duty ter lay aside ever'thing when the skeul needs 'tendin' tu. I know hit's mighty hard ter neglect my fambly fer the skeul, but

I 'm a public servant an' must do my duty." He spoke the last with the air of a martyr. The wife went on with her household duties without saying anything further, for she had learned by long years of experience that when her husband set his head to a thing it was useless to waste words in trying to change him.

Westwood went out to the barn and did a few little odd jobs until he was sure all the children had gone to school, and then he started up the path through the woods towards the schoolhouse. He arrived a few moments after school was taken up. In answer to his knock the master opened the door and, seeing who it was, very politely invited him in. The director tried very hard to look dignified as he sat in the chair which the master had given him; but with the curious eyes of the whole school upon him, it was a very hard thing to do. The teacher went on with his work as if there was no one present but the pupils. This had a rather bad effect on the composure of the director. The latter had thought to embarrass the teacher by his presence, and then it would be

a very easy matter to find some trivial fault and call his attention to it before the school, and he felt sure that in the argument that would follow he could best the teacher, and then the children would bear the report to their several homes, and this would start a feeling of dissatisfaction against the teacher. Then it would be an easy matter to oust him. As he sat there trying to find some way to begin the execution of his plan he grew more uncomfortable every moment. At last, arriving at a stage bordering on desperation, he decided that something must be done at once. The arithmetic class, of which Tom was a member, was at the board. A very simple problem had been given out by the teacher, and Westwood watched his son's vain attempt to solve it. The master was watching him also, and intended to help him after he had had a reasonable time to try its solution.

"Hit 'pears ter me thet ye ourghter help a scholar when he can't git his example." It was the director who spoke. The teacher turned and faced him as he quietly replied:

"I always try to help them, Mr. Westwood."

"Wall, hit do n't 'pear ter me thet yo 're tryin' ter help that boy."

"I always give them a chance to do it without help, and then, when I find they can not, I help then."

"Wall, I 'low yer ain't cut out fer a teacher, fer the skeul hain't gittin' along like hit oughter." The director's courage seemed to be reviving. "You see, as I 'm president of the board, I feel the 'sponsibility restin' on me, an' I do n't wantter see the skeul run down. Now, jedgin' from what I 've seed this mornin', ye ain't jist the kind of man hit takes ter make a teacher. Of course, I hain't no reason ter say thet yer hain't a good young man, an' mebbe yer kin keep good order in skeul, but the main thing air larnin' the childern, an' not keepin' order. Hit 'pears ter me that yer hain't larnin' them 'nuff 'bout figerin', an' thet 's 'bout the main study, I 'low. Now, I know 'bout this by the way my boy Tom is a-doin'. Wy, I jist give him the easiest kind of a example this mornin', an' he could n't begin ter work hit; an' now he 's standin' up there at thet board, not knowin' a

thing 'bout thet 'n' ye give him, an' yer do n't seem ter know how ter 'splain hit ter him. I tell ye thet hain't no way ter keep skeul, young man."

He paused to see what effect his words were having on the teacher. He had lost all his embarrassment now, and had assumed an air of superiority. Ray had been listening to his words very quietly. He suspected that the man did not like him and was devising some scheme that would ultimately cause him to lose his position.

"Mr. Westwood, I think we had better talk this matter over alone." And without waiting for the other to remonstrate, he tapped the bell for recess, and every pupil arose and filed out of the room, much to the chagrin of the director. He had not counted on this. It would spoil his plan, for he had counted on the children hearing the whole thing and reporting it to their parents. After the last pupil had gone outside, Ray turned to the other and said:

"Now I feel we may talk plainly to each other. In regard to your son's knowledge of arithmetic, let me say that there are some who

do not take naturally to certain studies, and he certainly does not take to arithmetic. I have been doing my best to help him, but as yet he has not learned to have confidence enough in himself to use what little knowledge he has. It is quite natural that in this case he would not be able to solve the problem, no doubt knowing it to be a test whereby you were going to judge the whole school and make a public example of him. Under ordinary conditions I am quite sure that he could solve it. As to the other members of the class, I could prove that they are rapidly advancing in their knowledge of this study."

Silas Westwood could barely conceal his anger and disappointment, but he realized that, since the pupils had been sent out, there was nothing to be gained by arguing; therefore he felt that he had better get out of it as easily as possible.

"Wall, I jist thought hit was my duty ter come round and see 'bout things, as I was the president of the board," he said, somewhat crest-fallen.

"I am glad to have you come, and will always take great pleasure in explaining to you or any one else anything about the school."

"I 'low I 'd better be a-goin' now, fer I hev ter go ter the store," said the director, turning his hat uneasily in his hands as he arose to go. "Yer know thet I 'm the kind of a feller thet sets a heap by larnin', an' thet 's why I come up here ter see yer, fer I want this skeul ter be run es good es possible."

"That 's all right, sir; I 'm glad you came," replied Ray, trying hard not to smile at the other 's change of manner.

"Wall, good day!" And he was gone. His meek little wife was very much surprised to see him back so soon, but very wisely refrained from saying anything.

As soon as the visitor was out of sight Ray rang the bell and resumed the work where he had left off. As the arithmetic class was called back to finish their work the teacher went to where Tom Westwood was working and said very kindly:

"Now, Tom, let me help you. I 'm sure

you can do this problem.” Then he very deftly guided the boy’s mind into reasoning it out.

Whatever thought troubled him concerning the effect of the director’s visit upon the school was dispelled by a conversation he had with Roxy Nettles at noon that day.

He was trying to read when he heard some one approaching his desk, and, raising his eyes from his book, he saw her standing before him.

“Mr. Jones,” she began, “I know that you are afraid that what has happened this morning will not have a good effect upon the school. “Do n’t let that worry you, for all the pupils feel that it was very unkind of Mr. Westwood to talk to you as he did. Even Tom did n’t like it.”

“I thank you, Miss Roxy, for telling me this, for I must confess that I was somewhat worried about it.”

“I do n’t think the report of the affair which they will carry home will hurt you in the least. But there is something else I wanted to speak to you about that I almost forgot. My parents

told me to invite you to spend next Saturday and Sunday at our house."

"Tell them I shall be very glad to come," he replied, very heartily.

"I must get those algebra problems," she said, turning back to her seat.

When Ray had begun to teach the school he found that this girl had finished the work in the grades, and he had urged her to take up some high-school work, which she did, and was progressing very rapidly. As he watched her golden head bending over her book a strange new feeling filled his heart. What could it mean? Love? He cast the thought aside and, taking up his book again, tried to read; but on every page he could see a golden head and blue eyes.

CHAPTER VII

THE MEETING AT THE MILL



UTUMN was slowly slipping into winter. There was a chill in the air that made one shiver. The leaves were beginning to change their luxuriant dress of red and yellow for the somber brown. A thin sheet of ice would appear on the creek which was fed by the spring at the foot of the hill, and by noon it would disappear under the gentle influence of the sun's rays. It had been an exceedingly fine autumn, and while the days and nights were still beautiful, one had the feeling that they were soon to give way to the cold, bleak ones of winter.

On one of these fine afternoons Ray decided that instead of going directly home he would go by the Watkins home and see the old couple, for he had not visited them since the first Sab-

bath he had been in this community. He had met Uncle Jim once since that time, and the old man had asked him why he had not come back to see them, and had insisted on him coming soon. Ray had purposely avoided the little home on the creek, for he was afraid that Uncle Jim would again open up the subject of the previous conversation, which had been so unpleasant for the teacher. Somehow on that afternoon he felt differently about it, for as he walked along he wondered if the old man would say anything about it; and as he thought that possibly he would not, something like a feeling of disappointment came into his soul. In some way he had changed in his attitude to what he felt was his duty, since the day Roxy Nettles had tried to encourage him after his troubles with the director. These hill folks, upon whom he had looked with so much contempt, had begun to interest him, and the duty which meant a sacrifice for him did not seem so unattractive now.

He pushed along the path through the woods for a few moments, when suddenly he came to the brow of the hill. The scene which

lay before him was a peaceful one. He stood for a moment drinking it in before proceeding further. The sun was half hidden by the hill on the right, and its soft rays were kissing the tops of the highest trees in the valley. Nestled down on the bank of the creek, he saw the little cabin. A thin, blue ribbon of smoke was curling gracefully out of the chimney. He could see Uncle Jim out in the back yard getting an armful of wood, and Aunt Sue was throwing corn from a pan she held in her hand to some chickens clustered about her feet. All at once a spirit of boyishness possessed the teacher, and, putting his fingers to his lips, he gave a long, loud whistle. Aunt Sue stopped feeding the fowls and looked upward. Uncle Jim dropped the stick he was just about to place on the pile in his arms and also looked upward. They saw him, for when Ray waved his hand to them they both returned the salute. As he hurriedly pushed down the hillside he saw them coming out to the side gate to meet him.

“Wall, I do declar, ef hit ain’t the teacher,” said the old man, as Ray came nearer.

"We're powerful glad ter see you," said the old lady. "Father said hit looked like yer was mad 'bout sompin', er ye 'd been 'round 'fore this time; but I 'lowed yer was n't thet kind thet 'ud git mad 'bout nuthin'."

"Yas," chimed in the old man, without giving the teacher a chance to say anything, "mother 'pears ter hev a heap o' respect fer yer. She 'lowed ye 'd come jist es soon es yer could."

Ray noticed Aunt Sue raise her glasses and wipe her eyes with her apron. Uncle Jim seemed to notice it also.

"I 'low Mister Jones 'll stay fer supper, mother."

"Yas, he must, an' I 'll go right in now an' git it ready;" and with that the old lady hurried into the house.

Her husband watched her until she disappeared, and then he turned to Ray and said:

"I 'low yer noticed thet mother was a leetle 'fected when ye come up, an' hit 's fer this reason: yer so much like our boy whut's gone, an' when yer stood up yander on top of thet hill an' whistled, hit reminded us of the way

he uster do when he 'd been gone somewhar an' was a-comin' back hum."

A tear stood in his eye as he spoke, and Ray was silent, for he felt that the old man's thoughts were too sacred to be interrupted. Turning toward the house, he said:

"Le' 's go in, fer hit won't take long fer mother ter git supper ready."

When they were seated before a big, roaring fire the young man said:

"It seems so good to get back here once more, fer this is the most homelike place in all this country to me."

"Wall, we 're glad you feel thet a way 'bout hit, fer we 're allus tickled ter hev yer come ter see us. Hit does us so much good. I wish yer 'd come oftener."

"I 'll try to come oftener after this."

They talked on until supper was announced, but the old man never mentioned the subject they had discussed on the teacher's previous visit. After supper Aunt Sue joined them as they sat before the fire. Ray sang for them, and as the old folks listened their faces were radiant with

delight. Sometimes, when he sang a hymn that was familiar to them, they joined in and sang with him. Ray had never enjoyed singing so much, and perhaps he had never sung with more feeling. As he sang "Where is my wandering boy to-night?" the tears streamed down the furrowed cheeks of the old people; and when he sang "Bring him to me in all his sin, and tell him I love him still," a hearty "Amen" broke simultaneously from their lips. After he had finished that song the master arose to go, and as he shook their hands in good-bye they pressed invitations upon him to return very soon. Promising to do so, he departed.

It was a beautiful night. A full moon was shining and made it almost as light as day. The crisp night-air made one feel like moving along briskly. As Ray came to the old mill he thought he saw some one standing on the bank of the creek just above the wheel. As he drew nearer he saw a man who was looking down the road so intently that he did not notice the approach of the teacher. When he was only a few paces

away from where the man stood, the latter turned; and as he did so the moonlight fell upon his face. Ray recognized his acquaintance from the East, Carson. He seemed as much surprised at the unexpected meeting as Ray, but was the first to speak.

“Good evening, Mr. Jones; this is a fine evening.” Ray returned the salutation, and Carson went on as if he thought an explanation was in order:

“I was just coming from Mr. Whiteside’s, on my way to Mr. Rupert’s, and was compelled by the beauty here to stop for a few moments.”

“This is a very beautiful place a night like this,” returned Ray.

“How do you like this country by this time?” continued the other. “I hope the unfortunate affair at the apple peeling did not give you a bad impression of it.”

“I like it very well,” replied the teacher, ignoring the last remark of the other.

“I find it very slow and tiresome here, but my health is good, and for that reason I stay.

I came here in search of health, and you know one will put up with almost anything for the sake of health."

Ray had often wondered why this seemingly talented young man could content himself in this out-of-the-way place. The reason he gave sounded very plausible, but he did not look like a man of ill-health. The master noticed that all the time they were standing there, Carson appeared nervous and kept looking down the road as if he expected some one from that direction. He showed no sign of going on his way to Rupert's. At last Ray said:

"It is getting so late, I guess I'll be on my way."

Carson appeared at a loss to know just what to say, for he had no visible reason for staying, and he seemed to have no intention of going. As Ray began moving up the road, the other mumbled something about staying a little while longer. Ray could not but feel that the young man's reasons for staying were such as would not bear inspection. When he made the turn in the road he could not refrain from turning

and looking back. He saw another man approach where the latter was standing, and the two engaged in conversation. Several times they pointed in the direction which the teacher had gone. The latter was hidden from view by a tree. While he was watching he saw a third man appear, and then all three went into the mill. Ray went home that night with a heart full of forebodings as a result of this strange meeting.

CHAPTER VIII

ROXY'S HOME

THE days went slowly by in their monotonous march to the past; one like the other to Ray. However, there was a vein of light shining down through them that made them bearable, and that was the anticipation of the visit to Roxy's home on the coming Saturday. The master had often wondered why she was so unlike the other people of the neighborhood, and had finally decided that it was because of her home influence; so he was anxious to see if this decision was correct. When Saturday at last arrived, he arose very early, for he was going to Spring Bluff with Joe, and then walk from there to the Nettles homestead. As the big farm wagon jolted along over the rocks he inhaled the fresh, crisp morning air, and it made him tingle from head to foot with new life. How great it was to live

in this beautiful old world! As they came out of the woods, about two hundred yards down the road appeared a little group of three buildings, which the teacher knew must be Spring Bluff. A crowd of Saturday loafers had already gathered on the porch in spite of the sting in the air. Some sat on boxes, others sat on the edge of the porch, letting their legs dangle downward. They seemed a perfectly contented lot as they indulged in their rural gossip, chewed their long green, and whittled. Ray spoke a greeting to the group, but none responded save Sam Carson, who sat in their midst. He spoke in his usual bland manner. Bill Rupert, who sat near him, simply stared insolently. The teacher took no notice of him, for he had not taken a fancy to him at the first meeting, and he cared very little whether he spoke or not; but when he noticed the indifference with which John Whiteside treated his greeting, it made him feel disappointed, for he had liked John's appearance from the start. The latter was engaged in conversation with a young man, Sandy Rowen.

"Yer say the' 's goin' ter be a dance over ter

Rupert's to-morrer night?" Ray heard him question as he passed by.

"Yas," replied Sandy; "an' I 'low the 's ter be some big doin's. Ye be shore ter be thar. The fellers over on Dry Branch sent us word thet they was comin' ter break the hull thing up. Wa 're ready fer 'em, ye bet; but ye git all the fellers over on the ridge ye can ter come, fer we may need all the he'p we can git."

"Hev yer tole the teacher?" asked John, nodding his head toward the door, through which Ray had just disappeared into the store.

"Naw," drawled the other; "Rupert's kinder got hit in fer him somehow, an' he do n't want him 'round." Then, lowering his tone, as if he was afraid Rupert would hear him, he said: "Bill's feared he's goin' ter beat him outen his gal, I 'low. The' say thet all the gals is 'bout crazy arter him, 'specially Lou Simpson." Sandy was too busily engaged in whittling to notice how red John's face got at the mention of Lou's name. "I heerd thet he's givin' her lessons ter home. 'Low he's edicatin' her fer a teacher's wife." Here he punched

John in the ribs fer emphasis, and gave a little cackle which was meant for a laugh. Before it was well out of his mouth, John's big, open hand collided with the back of his head, and Sandy found himself sprawling out in the road. The other loafers came to attention immediately, but none seemed willing to interfere. They all knew John, and they feared to arouse him. He was naturally a quiet, peaceable fellow, but when aroused was the mightiest man in the hills. He had arisen and was standing, looking out over the valley, his face working with rage. As Sandy arose from where he had fallen, he did so cautiously, as if he expected another blow from that mighty arm; but John paid no attention to him. After standing a moment in silence he walked to his horse, which was tied to the rack across the road, mounted, and rode away. After he was gone, Bill Rupert spoke:

"Whut 's wrong, Sandy?"

"Dunno. I was jist tellin' him 'bout the hop, an' he turned loose an' handed me one when I was n't lookin'."

"I 'll jist bet my boots he would n't hev rid

off thet away ef he 'd done me like he done ye," said a big, rough-looking man, boastfully.

"I would n't say nuthin' ef I was yer, Jig Jefferson. I 'low the boys hain't fergot how he done yer up once when ye was blowin' 'round 'bout bein' sich a fighter," spoke up Sandy, hotly. The bold one strode off into the store, as if he had just thought of something that he wanted to purchase. Turning to the others, Sandy said, fiercely: "See ef I don't git him fer this yet. I hain't done nuthin' ter him, an' I hain't goin' ter 'low no man ter slap me fer nuthin'."

All had happened so quietly and quickly that no one on the inside of the store knew what had happened without. Ray had found Mr. Nettles within, and after he had done the trading that he had come to do, he announced that he was ready to go. Ray followed him out the back door, for he was going through the woods, as it was nearer than around by the road. They walked rapidly, and in a short time Ray had his first glimpse of Roxy's home.

It was a large, two-story frame house, which

sat back from the road on a small knoll. A rail fence surrounded it; a red sandstone walk led from the rude gate to the front doorsteps. The yard was full of shrubbery. A few late autumn flowers were blooming beside the steps. Ray followed his host up the red sandstone walk into the house. Entering a big, cheery-looking room, he was greeted by a comely-looking woman of forty, that Mr. Nettles introduced as his wife.

"I am glad to see you, Mr. Jones. We welcome you to our home," she said, pleasantly. "It is always a pleasure to us to have visitors, especially our school teacher." As she spoke Ray could see the striking resemblance between her and Roxy; the same eyes and hair; the same intelligent, refined face, save for the more matured look of the mother's. When he had finished his mental comparison of mother and daughter he could not help but contrast the husband and wife. He was a large, rough man, and used the dialect of the hills, but seemed to be kind and gentle in the home and to adore his wife.

"Now yer make yerself ter hum," he said, "fer I 've got some work ter do thet can't be put off fer another day. I 'low my wife can entertain yer," he said, as he looked at her proudly, "an' then Roxy 'll be ter hum 'fore long. She jist went down on the crick ter see how the old Watkins folks air gittin' 'long."

"That 's all right," replied Ray; "I won't be very hard to entertain. Please don't let me interfere with the duties of any of the family."

"My husband and the boys are kept very busy," said the wife as Nettles left the room. "They are farming a good deal of land, and when one thing is done there is always another to do."

"I did not know that you had any boys in your home. I thought Miss Roxy the only child."

"No, she is not. I have two sons, both older than Roxy. You will meet them when they come in for dinner. And that reminds me that it is almost dinner time; so you will have to excuse me while I go to the kitchen and get it ready."

When Ray was left alone he began to look around the room. A rag carpet covered the floor; the furniture was neatly arranged; curtains hung over the windows; a nicely-worked cover hung from the mantle, on which a row of books was placed. Pictures decorated the walls. In all, it had an air of refinement that was not customary for the homes of the hills. He was right in his decision that it was the home influence that made Roxy unlike her associates. He went to the mantle and, selecting a volume of Longfellow's poems, seated himself and began to read. He did not get much out of the book, however, for his thoughts were not on its contents. He was thinking of the opportunity he had of making more of these homes like the Nettles home. He was really beginning to see visions of the ideal condition of this neighborhood. He wondered why John Whiteside was acting so strangely toward him, and what was the matter with Bill Rupert. He felt like he could help them both to a higher life, if only permitted to do so. And why was Sam Carson allowed to impose himself upon these simple

folks, no doubt leading many of the young men into ways of sin and crime that could be won for some noble cause if Carson's influence could somehow be removed? Was Uncle Jim's boy still alive? And if so, was there not some way to bring him back? Oh, the work that could be done for humanity and God amid these hills if some one was willing to do it! He thought that he might do it if the sacrifice was not so great, for he was confident that he had been called to the work; but how could he afford to give up all his long-cherished ambitions for the sake of these people? He was aroused from his thoughts by heavy footsteps and men's voices in the other room. Presently Mrs. Nettles appeared in the doorway and invited him to dinner. Laying his book aside, he went into the kitchen, where he met the two young men of the family. George, the elder, a man of twenty-two, was tall and broad, and was very much like his father. Dan, who was two years younger, was more on the order of the mother and sister.

"There is to be another dance over at our neighbor's to-morrow night," said Dan, as they

were all seated at the table. "I saw Jig Jefferson, and he was telling me about it."

"I guess there 'll be trouble, as usual," remarked George; "for the Dry Branch fellows will be there if they hear about it."

"They 've done sent word that they 're coming."

"It is dreadful to think that it is impossible to have anything around here without a disgraceful fight," said the mother.

"Why, mother, it 's never very serious; they never kill," said George, with a smile at his mother.

"But some have been pretty badly hurt," suggested Dan, seriously. "The Ruperts wanted John Whiteside to come over and help them out; but they are doubtful whether or not he will come, for in some way Sandy Rowen made him mad, and he knocked Sandy off the store porch into the road. You know Rowen is the one that is getting the dance up."

"I did n't see no fightin' at the store this mornin'," said the father. "Did yer, Mister Jones?"

"Why, no, I did n't," replied Ray. "I saw John Whiteside and a red-headed fellow sitting on the edge of the porch talking as I went into the store, but they did not seem to be having any trouble."

"Well, I guess it was after you went in. There's never much noise to John when he is fighting, and he scares the other fellow into being still," said Dan.

Ray went out to the barn with the boys after the meal had ended, and while they were hitching up the team he chatted with them. He found them to be very agreeable and intelligent conversationalists. After they had gone to the field, the teacher decided to take a walk in the woods. Accordingly he set out down the road. He discovered a little path turning off from the road into the woods, and entered it.

The trees were almost bare, the sweet-throated songster that a little while ago had made the woodland ring with cheerful music had gone. The wild flower that had freighted each passing breeze with its perfume, and had delighted the eye with its gorgeous splendor, was

withered and broken. A few of the sturdier ones had left little brown stocks as monuments of past glory. All was silent now. How lonely was the scene! As Ray walked on, the gloom and loneliness of the woods seemed to settle down over him. He thought of himself as away from home, in the midst of strangers, and the old feeling of homesickness took possession of him. So bent upon his gloomy thoughts was he that he failed to see a young woman approaching. When he at last became aware of her approach, he looked up with a start.

"Do n't get frightened, Mr. Jones; it is only I," said Roxy, laughing at his startled condition.

"I was n't frightened in the least, but was so lost in thought that I did not realize for a moment where I was when you approached," he said, joining her in the laugh.

She made a beautiful picture as she stood there in that lonely, desolate spot. The red hood had slipped from her head and hung suspended by the strings down her back; her golden hair was parted neatly and was caught up with a red ribbon at the back of her head; her cheeks

were as rosy as the clouds when tinted by the sun on a summer evening; her dress was of blue calico, but was very much more becoming than silk or satin would have been.

"When did you come?" she questioned.

"This forenoon."

"I have been down to Uncle Jim's. I suppose mother told you. I intended to get home earlier, but the old people seemed so anxious for me to stay that I could n't leave any sooner."

"How are they to-day?"

"They are as usual, I suppose; but they worry so much over their lost boy. They love so much to have you come, for they say that you remind them of him so much. They told me how much good your last visit did them when you sang."

"What about that boy?" said Ray, rather abruptly. "I heard them mention something about him, and saw how it affected them; so I did not ask them anything about him, but am anxious to know something about the affair."

"Well," replied Roxy, slowly, "it's a rather long story if I were to go into details. I'll not

do that, for it would not interest you anyway; but if you are going back to the house I'll tell you the main facts as we walk." All this time they had been standing where they had met, and as they started toward the girl's home, she began her story:

"The old couple came here from Tennessee many years ago when they were young married people, and settled where they are living at the present time. Later Uncle Jim built the old mill and began to grind for the neighborhood. Through the years that followed, seven sons were born. All died in infancy save the last-born. The dear old couple idolized him and did everything they could to make him grow up into a good man. Uncle Jim was bent on making a preacher out of him, but the boy was inclined to be wild. When he was only fourteen he would go to St. Clair or Union or some other town, and stay until his father would go after him. As he approached manhood he would leave, and be gone a few weeks, but would always turn up. He was a bright boy in school; always led in his classes. He was good-hearted,

and made everybody like him. He would never take up with the boys of this community, but when he was not gone on one of his trips he was constantly at home. They could never tell when he was going to leave, for he would seem to be just as contented as could be, and suddenly they would find him missing. When he returned from these trips he was always dressed well, and would say that he was away at work. One morning about five years ago he left his home, saying that he was going to the postoffice, and he has never been seen or heard of since that time."

The teacher was listening intently to the narration. When she paused, he asked, "And have n't they any idea of his whereabouts?"

"No. All kinds of stories were afloat for a while, but none of them were ever confirmed."

"What is your opinion?" he asked, pointedly.

"Well," she replied, thoughtfully, "I believe he is alive and will be restored to his parents again some day. Such prayers as they pray will not go unanswered by the Heavenly Father who cares for us." Then, facing Ray, she spoke words that surprised him very much. "I feel

that you might aid greatly in bringing him back," she said.

"I? How could I do such a thing, Miss Roxy?"

"I can't tell you how; but I felt that God had sent you here to do a work for our people, and that if you would let Him, He might show you how you could bring Don Watkins back to his parents. Oh, you can not tell how much our people need some Moses to lead them out of this bondage of ignorance and sin!" The girl was looking at him, and in her big blue eyes there was a pleading look. He did not speak, but turned his head away. The girl spoke again:

"Have you ever felt that God wanted you to help us?"

They were nearing the house now. He opened the gate for her to pass through. She stopped and faced him, waiting for an answer. He spoke one word haltingly:

"Yes."

She turned and walked toward the house, and he followed.

CHAPTER IX

DARK DAYS



IN the Monday following his visit to the Nettles home, Ray awoke later than usual. As he looked out of the little window of his room he saw that the ground was covered with the first snow of the season. It was still snowing, and as he looked at the sullen sky he felt sure that it would continue to do so for some time. As he dressed himself, a frown settled down on his brow and a heavy weight seemed to be bearing down on his heart. He wanted to get away from that place before his purpose in life was entirely gone; he felt that for some time it had been slowly ebbing away, and he was yielding to the call of duty. Only two days before he had confessed to a mere girl that he was sure God wanted him to work for the redemption of these hill people. In some way—he could not understand just how—she had forced him to make the

confession; and now she knew, others would know; and what would they think of a man who knew his duty and then refused to do it? What would Lou think? Had he not tried to impress upon her that she must do the things she knew to be her duty if she wanted to be good? When she found out that he was a hypocrite she would despise him and would lose all faith in the doctrine he had taught her. What would his own folks at home think when they heard that he had run from duty? It would almost break their hearts, for they had always taught him, both by precept and example, that he should do his duty, no matter what the cost. What would his Heavenly Parent think? He might in some way deceive all others, but He knew and could see him shirking duty like a coward, selling out to the enemy, as Judas had done, for the vanishing things of earth. The thought of being a traitor was disgusting to him, and he was willing to strike a compromise with God. He got down on his knees and tried to tell Him that he would serve Him in the great cause of humanity if He would let him choose a more desirable place than

these hills. It seemed his words were thrown back at him. He arose, conscious that it must be a full surrender; that no compromise would be considered. In this gloomy state of mind he went out to breakfast. None of the family were in save Lou. She looked tired and worn, for she had come from the Rupert dance only an hour or so before. Ray greeted her with a simple "Good morning!" and sat down at the table. She poured out his coffee and then sat down near the stove, heaving a long sigh. Leaning forward, with her elbows resting on her knees and her chin in her hands, she stared gloomily into the fire. For a time Ray ate in silence, his mind full of his own dark thoughts; then the thought of the predicted fight at the dance flashed through his mind, and immediately his curiosity was awakened, and he turned his head toward her as he spoke:

"Did you have a good time at the dance last night?"

"No," replied the girl, wearily. "I'm getting tired of these dances they have around here. All they do is fight." He could not help but con-

trast the girl as she sat there, so dejectedly and yet with a certain dignity, with the Lou Simpson he had met only three months before. How decidedly her language was improving, and instead of blushing and giggling, as she used to do when any one addressed her, she could now talk and act fairly intelligently. Something like a gleam of satisfaction for a moment flashed through the gloom that enshrouded him, as he recognized the results of his own instruction.

“Did they have a fight last night?” he asked.

“Well, I just reckon they did,” she replied, raising herself into an upright position as she spoke. “You just ought to saw John Whiteside. My, but he’s a mighty fighter when he gets started! He was n’t thinking of fighting till they made him. He was sitting in a corner all by himself,” continued the girl, warming up to the theme. “The Dry Branch boys started the row and was fighting hard, but John never paid any attention to them, and I know he did n’t reckon on having anything to do with it. I was standing in one corner behind a table. Crazy Jake was standing just in front of the table,

leaning against it. One of the Dry Branch boys was fighting Sandy Rowen, and as they come tussling past where Jake was standing, Sandy jumped on the other side of Jake just as the other fellow struck. The lick that was meant for Sandy hit Jake. The Dry Brancher never noticed who it was that he hit, but kept right on at Jake, while Sandy slipped over to the other side of the room. I know he done it to get John started. John did n't see how Sandy had caused the fellow to hit Jake, for he was n't looking in that direction; but when he heard Jake cry out, he turned just in time to see his brother falling. He sprang at the man who had done it, and with one lick he floored him; then he stooped and picked Jake up and put him on the table. After that he went into them Dry Branch fellows and laid them out one at a time. My, but it was fine to see him clean them up after they had been so smart to try and break up the dance!" Her eyes glistened with admiration as she recited the mighty deeds of John. "As he was doing up the last man somebody shot a pistol, and John dropped to the floor like he

was dead. That stopped the fighting. When they picked him up they found a bullet-hole in his side. Oh, I hope he wont die! Do you think it will kill him?" she asked Ray, in half pleading voice.

"I 'm sure I do n't know just how serious it is, but it 's very possible that it may not prove fatal if it did not strike some of his vitals."

"I think," said the girl, "that it was Sandy Rowen who fired the shot, for I saw him standing in the shadow of the stairs about the time it happened, and I am sure I saw something bright in his hand that looked like a pistol just a few seconds before the shot was fired. After it happened, Sandy never showed up any more; so it looks like it was him."

The girl's accusation brought back to Ray's mind the story Dan Nettles had told of how John had knocked Sandy off the store porch, and it might be possible that he had taken this means of getting even.

"Might it not have been possible that one of the Dry Branch boys did it?"

"No; I do n't think so. It was Sandy

Rowen, and I 'd almost swear to it." And then she added, as Ray arose to go, "I do hope John won't die." He thought he saw tears in her eyes as she spoke. "Won't you go to see him after school this evening?"

He was at a loss just how to answer for a moment. Then he said, "I would be glad to go, but John seems to be angry with me about something, and perhaps he would not want me to come."

"That's just why I want you to go, for some one has told him something about you that has made him mad, and I want you to go and tell him it ain't so." And then, hiding her face in her hands and sobbing, she went on: "Mister Jones, you have been so kind to me. You showed me how ignorant I was, and have helped me to learn a little. You have told me of a higher life than what I'm living, and made me anxious to live that life. You taught me to know my own heart; and now, since I know it, I feel that all the love it contains is John's." Ray was affected by the girl's distress, and he replied very gently:

"Well, if I have helped you so much I am very glad; and as far as John is concerned, I think he is really a good fellow and worthy of your love, and I am very sorry he dislikes me."

"Don't you know why he is mad?" she asked, looking up through her tear-dimmed eyes.

"No."

"Well," she spoke, hesitatingly, "he thinks you are trying to beat his time with me, and he thinks that I love you. I think Sam Carson has put this into his head. I have wanted to tell him different, but I just could not get up the courage to do it, for if I would tell him that I did not love you, I'm afraid I would have to tell him all—and you taught me that it would not be ladylike for me to do that."

"I'll try to get a chance to explain all to him when he gets well enough to have visitors. I must be going, or I'll be late for school."

As he pushed on toward the schoolhouse through the falling snow, the conflict between duty and ambition revived again. He fought every inch of the ground, but felt that the forces on the side of duty were slowly but surely over-

powering his ambitious self, and that soon he must disgracefully retreat from the battleground or make an unconditional surrender. As he was entering the woods that crowned the hill which he was ascending, he turned and looked across the valley. It was desolate-looking, wrapped in its blanket of snow. The trees on the opposite hill seemed to stretch forth their bare arms to him appealingly. The very hills themselves seemed to tell him of their needs. He plunged into the woods and walked rapidly to the school-house. There were only a few pupils present, and he felt a certain sense of relief when he noted that Roxy was one among the missing. He knew that to be in her presence all day, when he was engaged in such a conflict, meant sure defeat for self.

The week passed on in this manner. Some days the battle raged fiercely as some imaginary reinforcement to ambition seemed to arise, and then all was quiet for a time, as if both forces were resting. By the end of the week he looked as if he had been through a spell of sickness, but the victory had not as yet settled on either side.

CHAPTER X

BILL RUPERT'S THREAT

LATE one afternoon not long after the dance, Bill Rupert walked down the snow-packed road that passed the Nettles home. He walked rapidly at first, as if he was afraid that he would get to his destination behind time. When he came in sight of the Nettles house he slowed up, and as he saw Roxy come out the door and start toward the road he so measured his steps that he was beside her when she came out into the road.

"Evenin', Roxy!" he said, as the two met.

"Good evening, Bill!" she replied, without stopping, but proceeding to walk down the road a little in advance of him.

"Ef ye air a-goin' down the road, 'low yer won't hev no kick 'bout my walkin' 'long side o' ye, will yer?" he said, with a look of triumph in his eye.

"Why, no, I do n't suppose I will," was the answer.

For a short time they walked on in silence. She acted as if her mind was occupied with thoughts that had better not be uttered, and he as if he were trying to sum up courage enough to speak of something that bore heavily upon his mind. At last he broke the silence:

"I 'low ef I was the teacher yer 'd be right glad ye was walkin' 'long hayr." The words came in a sneering tone. A hot flush mounted to her cheek, but she answered him quietly:

"Perhaps I would."

Rupert did not expect such an answer, for he looked bewildered for a moment, but made another attempt:

"I 'low he do n't keer much fer ye gals 'round hayr. Sam Carson says he is a-goin' ter marry some gal back whar he come from."

Roxy walked on, looking straight before her, and made no reply. Rupert seemed to be encouraged, for he went on:

"John Whiteside 's a-goin' ter tend ter him jist as soon as he gits well, fer gittin' Lou Simp-

son turned agin him. Yer know John's crazy 'bout Lou."

"I do n't believe he has done any such thing," replied the girl, with feeling. "Mr. Jones is a gentleman, and I do n't believe he is guilty of anything so base."

"Wall, Sandy Rowen was up ter Simpson's t' other day, an' he said Lou was a-talkin' ter him, an' she talks jist as good as the teacher does. He ast her whut made her talk so good, an' she said that the teacher was givin' her lessons ter home."

"Because he is teaching her to talk properly is no proof that he is trying to steal her affections from John."

"Wall, she do n't hev nuthin' to do with him any more. They was n't together any at the dance t' other night."

"Then it was for some other reason, for I am sure it is not Mr. Jones's fault. Here is where I stop," she added, as she turned in at the house of a neighbor, where she was bent on some errand.

Bill watched her go up the path to the house

and disappear within, and then he continued his walk alone. His soul was filled with rage, for he had failed in his purpose to injure the teacher in the opinion of Roxy, and he had certainly not helped his own cause. Muttering curses to himself, he turned off into the path that led down to Spring Creek, the same path on which a short time ago Ray had walked with Roxy. As he swung along through the snow he did not notice a man coming down the path which led into the one on which he was walking. When the two were within a few feet of each other, Rupert raised his eyes from the ground and looked into the eyes of the man that he desired to ruin. Both men stopped instantly and looked at each other, each waiting for the other to speak. It was not in the make-up of Ray to fear another man, and he waited rather impatiently for the other to start whatever he intended to do. Rupert's previous actions had warned him that for some reason, unknown to him, there would be trouble the first opportunity that presented itself.

"Kinder outer yer beat, ain't yer?" Rupert spoke at last.

"I do n't think so. I often go down to the Watkins home after school, and I always go this way."

"I 'low yer do n't go down there ever' time yer out this-a-way, do ye?"

"Well, perhaps not every time." Ray saw that Rupert was trying hard to lead him into a quarrel, and he determined not to be led.

After a moment Rupert spoke again. This time he did not try to conceal his wrath: "Yer know whut I mean, I 'low; so yer need n't try ter make me b'leve yer do n't. Ye go ter Nettles's sometime, do n't yer?"

"Why, yes; I have been there once or twice."

"Once or twict?" retorted the other. "I 'low ye hev been there once or twict, an' then some. I'd like ter know whut yer doin' up thar."

"Why, I find it a very pleasant place to go," replied Ray, quietly.

"I 'low yer do," sneered Rupert. "It would n't be so pleasant ef hit was n't fer Roxy bein' thar, would hit?"

"Perhaps not."

His composure seemed to cause the other man to lose his head completely, and this time when he spoke his body trembled with rage, and as he advanced a step nearer Ray, his fist was doubled up as if ready to strike a blow.

"The' ain't no use wastin' words, teacher," he began, "an' I 'm jist a-goin' ter tell yer sumpin' fer yer own good. The best thing fer yer ter do is ter leave this diggin' jist es soon es yer can."

"Mr. Rupert, will you kindly tell me why you would have me to leave?" Not a sign of the inward conflict showed on his person as the teacher spoke, for he was fighting against a desire to give this insulting young man a thrashing, as he felt he was able to do.

"Wy, ye 've got all the gals 'round hayr crazy 'bout yer, an' us fellers ain't a-goin' ter stand hit. Ye 've caused Lou Simpson ter quit John Whiteside, an' Roxy Nettles won't hardly look at me."

Somehow, as the truth broke upon the master, a great pity replaced the indignation he had held in his heart against this ignorant man. A

longing to help him sprang up in place of the desire to strike him. He felt guiltless concerning the accusation that he was trying to steal the affections of Lou; but how about Roxy? He felt a strange sweetness fill his heart every time he thought of her; and now, as this man had come to tell him he must leave her forever, he was sure it was, and perhaps he had unconsciously been trying to win her.

"Rupert," he said at last, with a certain firmness in his tone, "I am not going to leave. I have come here to teach this school, and I intend to do so. I want to be a help to this community if I can, and I wish you would let me help you. I don't believe that you are a bad fellow at heart, but you are being influenced by one who claims to be your friend, but is leading you on to ruin." Here Rupert's lips moved as if he was about to speak, but Ray kept on: "If you care for Roxy Nettles and will cut loose from these evil influences and try to be a man worthy of her, I will do my best to help you win her." Ray was surprised at his own words when he had finished; they seemed to come without an

effort, but later he realized what a sacrifice it meant for him.

Rupert stood staring at him now as if he was trying to figure out just what kind of a man this teacher was. Then he said:


"Whut do yer take me fer? I do n't want none o' yer help, an' ef ye knowed jist whut was good fer yer, yer 'd leave this place 'fore mornin'."

"Well, you can put it down that I'm not going," was the firm reply. "I do n't claim to be any fighter, but I do n't propose to be run out of this country by a pack of cowards such as sent you here with this threat." And then, extending his hand toward his angry opponent, he went on: "I'm ready to be your friend and help you, Bill, if you will let me."

"I do n't want yer help," said the other, fiercely, as he struck the offered hand aside. Then, turning, he went rapidly up the path in the direction from which he had come. It was growing late, and the master heard him muttering curses and threats as he disappeared in the darkness.

CHAPTER XI

A VOICE FROM THE PIT

N the same evening that Bill Rupert met the teacher, Uncle Jim and his wife were sitting before a big blazing fire in their little home on Spring Creek; the old man in his big armchair, smoking, and the old lady near him with an open Bible on her knees. She had paused a moment in her reading and let her glasses rest in the edge of her gray hair, their accustomed place when not in use. Uncle Jim awoke from the reverie into which he had fallen as she read, took his pipe from his lips, yawned, looked at the big clock on the mantle, and said:

“Wall, mother, it’s might’ nigh nine o’clock; ’bout time ter go ter bed, I ’low.”

“Yas, I ’low hit is,” replied the wife. She let her glasses rest on her nose once more and

began to turn the leaves of the Bible in search of a chapter to read aloud for the evening devotion. Suddenly she stopped in her search, arose, and went to the front door, opened it, and leaned out into the darkness for a moment. Then closing it, she came back to her chair, as she said:

"I kinder thought I heerd some one holler."

"I 'low you must hev been mistaken, fer I did n't hear nuthin. Mebbe hit ware a catamount. I heered Joe Simpson tellin' thet he seed one crossin' the crick down by the mill t' other night. He did n't hev his gun 'long, so he could n't kill hit."

Aunt Sue had decided on the chapter by this time and began to read: "Unto Thee will I cry, O Lord, my Rock; be not silent to me; lest if Thou be silent I become like them that go down into the pit." Just as she finished the first verse of this Psalm a faint sound was heard by both. The old man arose, took down his musket from the rack above the door leading into the kitchen, and proceeded through the kitchen to the back door, his wife following him. For a

moment both stood silent in the doorway, with strained ears to catch the faintest sound. They had not long to wait, for a cry of "Help!" was borne down the hillside on the crisp night-air.

"Hit ain't no catamount, father, but somebody thet 's in trouble."

"Hit sounds as if they was up there among them old prospectin' pits. Git the lantern, mother, an' I 'll go up an' see who 't is."

The voice was heard again, this time fainter, as if the source from whence it came was growing weaker.

"Hurry up, father," said the old lady as she handed him the old tin lantern; "he must be hurt. Mebbe I 'd better go 'long with you."

"Per'aps ye had, fer I 'm not as strong as I uster be, an' I might need some help."

Aunt Sue hastily threw on an old shawl, and together they began slowly to ascend the steep hill behind the house. The old prospecting pit of which the old man had spoken was about a hundred yards to the right of the path that led up the hill. It was therefore necessary, in order to reach the pit from the bottom of the hill, to

go over the rough, stony ground where no path had ever been made, for it was about half way up the side of the hill, and the only path that approached it was from the top. The old couple struggled bravely on through the unbroken snow. Once the old man broke through a crust which had formed over a hole and sank in up to his knee. Had he not grasped a nearby sapling for support, his leg might have been broken.

"Hit 's powerful strange he do n't holler no more," said Uncle Jim after they had succeeded in getting within a few yards of the pit.

"Mabbe he can't holler no more," was the sad rejoinder. A few more steps brought them to the brink of what seemed in the light of the dim lantern to be a yawning chasm, but in reality was only a hole eight or ten feet square and about five or six feet deep. Such pits were common in that section of the country. Mining companies had sent men out through those hills prospecting for lead, and after digging down a few feet, if the indications were unfavorable, they would leave the hole and go elsewhere.

As the old man held the lantern over the edge of the pit its rays did not reach to all parts of it; but as they stood silently trying to pierce the darkness in the remote corners, they heard a faint moan coming from one of the opposite corners.

"Hit 's somebody fell inter this hole," said the old man. "I 'll see ef I can't git down an' lift him out ef yer 'll hold the lantern, mother."

"Be keerful, father," and the old lady took the lantern, while the old man caught hold of an extended root and began to let himself down carefully until he felt his feet sink down into the snow and leaves that had settled on the bottom. After assuring himself of his footing he took the lantern from his wife and proceeded cautiously to the corner from where the moaning seemed to come. As the feeble ray of the lantern struggled through the darkness, it revealed the form of a man lying prone in the snow. Uncle Jim approached him and knelt down, and as the light fell upon the pallid face he turned his head in the direction of his wife and said, in excited tones:

"Hit 's the teacher, an' he looks ter me as ef he is might' nigh gone."

Aunt Sue received the news with a little cry of pain and said:

"Oh, father, whut can we do? Do yer 'low yer can lift him out?"

"I 'll try," was the reply. In his younger days Jim Watkins had been noted for his wonderful strength, but the rheumatism and Father Time had wrought upon him until he was only a shadow of his former self. Necessity and excitement often cause a man to do things that under ordinary circumstances would be impossible. Uncle Jim could never understand just how he got the teacher out of that pit and down the hill and into his own home. He seemed to be endowed with superhuman strength, or perhaps his strength of former days had returned for the moment to assist him. Be that as it may, it was not with him long, for as soon as he saw the teacher placed safely on the lounge before the fire he sank almost helpless into a chair, and for a time the old lady's attention was

divided between the young man on the lounge and the old man in the chair. Presently the old man rallied, and as he looked at the helpless form on the lounge he said:

"Air he hurt much, mother?"

"I b'leve his leg's broke an' he's 'most froze ter death. No tellin' how long he laid up thar in thet hole."

"I 'low he oughter hev the docter. Mebbe I'd better try ter go fer him." He made a painful attempt to rise, but fell back weakly. "I do n't 'low I can stir. 'Pears ter me thet I've strained my back."

"No, father, yer can't go," the wife replied, as she laid a gentle hand on his shoulder as if to prevent him from making a second attempt to rise. "We'll jist hev ter trust the Lord an' wait tel He sends us some help. His heart 'pears ter be more reg'lar now, an' he's gittin' warmer," she continued, as she took the teacher's hand in hers. "Mebbe we'd better finish our evenin' worship now." She took up the Bible from a chair, where she had laid it

when they had heard the teacher's cry for help. She turned to the Twenty-eighth Psalm, which she had been reading, and began:

"Hear the voice of my supplications when I cry unto Thee." When she came to the seventh verse it seemed that the sentiment of her heart was going up to the Supreme Helper: "The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusteth in Him, and I am helped." As she finished the psalm the look of worry and anxiety that had overspread her face gave way to one of peace and trust.

"I 'low the Lord 'll hear ye, father, ef yer set in yer cheer an' pray, seein' yer can't wall help hit." She came and knelt down by her husband's chair. The old man reverently bowed his head and in a weak, trembling voice prayed. He asked God to look with mercy upon them in their helpless condition and spare the life of the teacher, and show him what a great opportunity he had to help his fellow-men. Then he prayed for his own wandering boy, that God would protect him and some day bring him back to them and make him a useful man in this

world. Long after the amen was said they remained in their attitude of worship, as if awaiting an answer to the simple petition. Finally Aunt Sue raised herself from her knees to see if the teacher needed some attention. Then her husband raised his head and wiped his eyes with his red bandana and said:


"I feel that God will somehow answer our prayer, mother."

"We'll wait patiently for His own good time," she replied, reverently.

All through the long weary hours of the night they watched the teacher, looking for some sign of returning consciousness, but not until the day began to break was their patience rewarded.

CHAPTER XII

ROXY AND LOU

N the morning after the event recorded in the last chapter a group of boys and girls was gathered about the door of the Spring Creek schoolhouse. The girls huddled themselves together, trying to protect themselves from the biting air; the boys were moving about in an effort to keep up circulation. There was much loud talking among the larger ones as each one tried to outdo the other in saying smart things for the benefit of the giggling girls.

"I betcher he 's got skeered an' run off," said one.

"I shore wish he hes; then we would n't hev ter come ter skeul no more," said another.

"I 'low I could tell sompin' 'bout all this ef I wanted ter," said a third, as he began to

move about with a swagger. Immediately all eyes were on him.

"Go 'n' tell whut yer know 'bout hit, Abe," came from the throats of a half dozen or more.

"Whut yer take me fer?" said Abe Rupert, for it was a younger brother of Bill. "Must 'low I 'm er fool ter go 'round tellin' ever'thing I know."

"Why do n't yer tell, Abe? They ain't nary one of us that 'll tell," said one of the larger girls as she came near the center of attraction. The latter looked at the eager faces and realized his advantage.

"Whut 'll yer gimme ef I tell ye all?" he said, in a bartering tone.

"I 'll give yer this apple," said the girl.

"I 'll give yer these hickernuts," said a boy. Many others offered to contribute of their little store of eatables.

Abe very deliberately took off his hat and held it extended toward the group, saying at the same time:

"Aw, wall, ef yer won't say nuthin' ter no one erbout hit, I 'low I might tell yer; but shore

as yer tell hit, I 'll never tell yer nuthin' else." After he had carefully stored the goodies from his hat into his pockets he told his secret:

"Why, thar was one of the gang thet met the teacher over yander in the woods back of Uncle Jim's place last night an' tole him he 'd better leave this place 'fore mornin', er sumpin' turrible would happen ter him; an' yer see he hain't here, an' hit 's time fer books; so yer all know whut 's happened."

The scholars had been so intent upon their transaction that they had not noticed the approach of a new arrival, who quietly took her place behind the hero just in time to hear the secret revealed. It was Roxy Nettles, and as she listened to the revelation her mind went back to her meeting with Bill Rupert, and she remembered that he had turned into the path that went down to the mill; and if the teacher had gone down to the Watkins home, as he often did, he would take the path from the schoolhouse which led into the one that Bill had taken, and in that case they had met. What had been the result? She hated to think of it,

for she knew that Bill was very angry when he had left her, and when in such a state of mind was dangerous. She was afraid to make any inquiries about the affair for fear of showing unusual anxiety before her schoolmates. While she stood silently listening to the comments on Abe's story, and longing to ask him some questions, Lou Simpson dashed out of the woods and walked rapidly up to the group and asked excitedly:

"Is Mr. Jones here?"

"No," came a chorus of voices.

"Well, that does beat all." Then, seeing Roxy, she addressed her, "Has he been up your way?"

"No," was the reply.

"Well," continued Lou, "it's mighty strange. He always tells us when he's not coming home in the evening, and he did n't say anything about going anywhere last night. Sometimes he goes to Uncle Jim's in the evening, but he never stays there all night."

"Wall, I 'low we 'uns might es wall go home, fer I 'll betcher he 'll not come back to

this hayr skeul no more," said Abe, very wisely.

"Why won't he?" asked Lou, very quickly.

"Because," broke in Roxy, before Abe could speak, "Abe says the gang that does so many mean things in this community ordered him to leave last night, and he has become frightened and gone."

"I do n't believe it," said Lou, with a show of feeling. "Mr. Jones ain't that kind of a man to run. May be," she continued, her eyes flashing fire, "they 've played one of their dirty tricks on him, and he is not able to get here; but I know he 'll never run like a coward."

Roxy noticed the spirited way in which Lou defended the master, and she also noticed the wonderful way in which the girl's manner of expression had changed, and for the first time in her simple life she experienced the bitter pang of jealousy. Abe had been quelled by the girl's fiery words, and like a whipped pup he started for home. The others followed suit; some going in one direction and some in another, until all had been swallowed up by the words save

Roxy and Lou. The latter was the first to speak after the last pupil had disappeared, and her words quickly dispelled every bit of jealousy Roxy had entertained.

"Do n't think I 'm in love with him, Roxy, for I 'm not," she said, strongly emphasizing the last words; "but he has helped me so much that I feel that I can never repay him. I would indeed be an ungrateful creature if I did not defend him when he is being accused of cowardice unjustly."

"You are confident that what Abe Rupert has just said about him is not true?" questioned the other girl. Lou looked at her a moment curiously and then replied with a question:

"Well, you do n't think he has gone, do you?"

"No, I do n't," replied Roxy, stoutly; "and I 'm glad we agree on it. Now, since we are sure that he has not left like a coward, and since he is not here, we know that something has happened to him. Perhaps now he is greatly in need of a friend. We are his friends. Should we not do something for him?"

"Of course we should, if we only knew what to do."

"Well, the first thing to do is to find him. Let's go down to Uncle Jim's and see if they know anything of his whereabouts." Lou readily consented, and the two girls started off down the path toward the place mentioned.

The girls so suddenly brought together in their purpose to help the teacher had formed a bond of friendship which was to increase in strength with the passing years. They had never been more than acquaintances before. As they walked on through the woods that winter day, Roxy heard from Lou just how patiently and kindly the teacher had led her to find her better self, and how earnestly he had helped her to develop it. Roxy's heart was welling up within her and her face was radiant as she heard the other girl's story, for she felt that he was beginning the work that God had called him to do. And then, as she thought of his unexplained absence from the schoolhouse, a shadow passed over her face, hiding its radiance for a moment as the passing cloud hides the

brightness of the sun. "But the just God who sent him to us will not allow him to be taken from us before his work is scarce begun," thought she, and the shadow passed away. They had come to the spot where, not twenty-four hours before, the teacher had met Bill Rupert, when Lou with a sorrowful face turned to Roxy and laid a detaining hand on her arm. They both stopped, and she spoke:

"Roxy, we have known each other for a long time, but have never been friends until to-day. Oh, how I have longed for a real true girl friend of late, some one that I might confide in, some one that could understand my heart. Mr. Jones has been so good and has listened to me and tried to help me, but there are some things a man can't understand. Roxy"—the voice was pleading and the eyes were full of tears as she clasped the other girl's hand in both of hers—"may I tell you all? You can understand, as only a woman can."

"Tell me, Lou," said Roxy, as she stroked the other's flushed cheek. "You can trust me, for we will always be friends now."

"When Mr. Jones came to stay with us," began Lou, "I thought—silly girl that I was—I must have him for my sweetheart. I did not know what love meant, but I tried every possible way to attract him. You remember the disgusting scene at the Whiteside apple peeling. How hateful I must have appeared to him then! It did not seem to me that I was making much progress in winning him; so I wrote him a note, telling him how much I thought of him. Then it was that he showed me how noble he was. Instead of taking advantage of my ignorance he showed me myself as I really was and what I could be, and in the awakening I learned what love really was. As I did so, the image of another man arose before me, and from that day my heart has belonged to him. And, Roxy, that image was John Whiteside." As she finished she hid her face against Roxy's arm and wept softly. The other gently put her arm around the weeping one and said:

"Does John know of your feeling for him?"

"That's just it," said Lou, raising her face, wet with tears. "I think John cares for me,

but because of my frivolous actions toward the teacher he thinks that I do not care for him. His mind has been poisoned by some of those who are always doing some harm in this neighborhood. He has been so bad since he got hurt at the dance that no one is allowed to see him; so Mr. Jones could not go to him and explain, and, of course, you know that I could not explain it all to him."

"I think if you will just be patient, Lou, that it will all come out right in good time. You can depend upon me to do all that lies within my power to make it come out right. I am glad that you have told me all, for now that we know each other better we shall love each other more. But let us hasten, for he may need us."

As the two girls walked on down the snow-packed path toward the creek, Roxy was going over Lou's words, and as she saw in her mind Ray's actions toward this simple girl of the hills he appeared very noble and grand to her. Her heart beat wildly, and the blushes played hide-and-seek on her cheeks. Oh, how she loved him! She must acknowledge it to herself.

How sweet was the confession, as over and over within her heart she said: "I love him. I love him!" How her heart went out to the girl walking beside her! She could truly sympathize with her. "We both love," thought Roxy; "but are we loved?"

As the girls came to the brow of the hill they saw the peaceful little valley wrapt in its blanket of snow, and in the midst the little Watkins cabin. They hastened down the hillside, into the yard by the side gate, around to the front door, and, without stopping to knock, opened it and walked in. For a moment they stood silent with surprise as their eyes beheld the scene before them. Uncle Jim was sitting on one side of the fireplace, Aunt Sue on the other, and the teacher lay on the lounge before it. Aunt Sue was the first to speak:

"I knowed you 'd come, honey," as she looked at Roxy; "an' here 's Lou," as she turned to the latter. "Wall, we 're shore 'nuff glad yer come, fer hit 'pears we do need help."

"Why, Aunt Sue, what does all this mean?" asked Roxy, pointing to the teacher, who smiled faintly.

"La, now, honey, we jist 'lowed he was 'bout gone when we got him hayr; but I 'low he hain't es bad es he 'peared ter be at first. I was mighty nigh shore his leg was broke, but hits only a strain. Of course, he 's mighty weak yit from the exposure." And then she told to the wondering girls the story of how they found Ray. After she had finished, Lou said:

"But you have n't told us how he got there."

"I 'low he can tell thet better 'n I can," replied the old lady, as she nodded to Ray.

"Well, there is n't much to tell, girls," said Ray, weakly. "It was dark when I got to the brow of the hill, as I had been detained along the road a little while, and I got off the path and wandered around until I fell into the pit. I suppose that I had been there perhaps an hour when they found me. I do n't think I am hurt much, and will be back to school in a few days."

"But who detained you?" said Lou.

"Oh, a friend of mine." He tried to speak lightly, but, owing to weakness, made a failure of it.

"How did ye gals know he was hayr?" Uncle Jim broke in.

"We did n't," replied Roxy. "I went to the schoolhouse, where I found all the pupils standing around outside, wondering why the teacher had not come. I had n't been there long when Lou came in search of him. She said he had n't come home the night before, and they were all uneasy about him. Then we decided to come down here and see if you knew anything of his whereabouts."

"Hit 's powerful nice ter hev young gals take sich a int'rest in yer, hain't it, teacher?" jokingly said the old man. The girls blushed, and Ray looked confused, but answered:

"Indeed it is, Uncle Jim."

"I 'll have to go and let the folks know I found you," said Lou. "I guess Roxy can stay and help out if needed."

"Yes, I 'll stay and help Aunt Sue, as she seems to have two invalids on hand," replied Roxy.


"If you think you will need the doctor, I 'll have Joe go after him when I get home," suggested Lou.

"No," said Ray, "I won't need him."

As soon as Lou was gone Roxy laid aside her wraps and began to straighten up the room, which had not received its morning attention. As she moved quietly about the room the master followed her with his eyes. Once she turned toward him, and as their eyes met, the tell-tale blushes appeared on her cheeks. "I wonder if she loves me?" thought the sick man on the lounge. "I love him; I love him!" thought the girl at her work.

CHAPTER XIII

JAKE CALLS ON THE TEACHER

 HE days that passed while the teacher was an invalid at the Watkins home were golden days for him. Uncle Jim was just able to hobble about the room to wait on himself. Ray could not do so much. Several times he had tried to put his foot to the floor, but the pain was so great that he could hardly refrain from crying out. Aunt Sue was not able to wait on the teacher and do the other necessary work, so Roxy came every day to help, and as she came each morning she brought such a cheerful face that, although the sky without was overcast with clouds and the wind was bitter cold, within the little home there was a golden radiance which warmed the soul of the teacher.

One morning about a week after the accident she came in and found Ray sitting in the big old rocker, with his lame foot lying on a chair

in front of him. He was sitting all alone, as the old folks were out in the kitchen.

"What are you doing, sitting up in that chair?" she said, approaching him and trying to look stern.

"Do n't look at me like that," he said, laughing, "or you 'll frighten me into a relapse, and then you 'll have to nurse me for another week or more."

"I am afraid I will, anyway, if you do n't get back to bed. Just look how pale you are. You know you do n't feel like being up;" and then she added, fixing her lips into a pretty little pout, "I 'm sorry you are so anxious to get free from the care of your nurse. It do n't speak well for my nursing to have a very sick man get up and try to take care of himself."

"Do n't say that, Roxy," he said, as he reached for her hand. "You have been the kindest and best nurse possible; but I hate to be so dependent, such a burden. I could lie here sick forever if you were near me." He drew the trembling, blushing girl toward him, and then, remembering his words to Bill Rupert,

he suddenly released her hands, turned his face toward the fire, and was silent. The girl was astonished at his strange actions. Why had he spoken so tenderly, and then, when she would have thrown herself at his feet in adoring love, why did he turn away so quickly? If she could have known the conflict that raged within him between love and duty she would not have wondered. The tempter was saying: "Tell her your love. Rupert is not worthy of her." Then the voice of duty replied, "But remember your promise to help him if he would try to be a man." The tempter persisted, "He is not worthy of her." "Have you given him a chance?" responded duty. And so the battle went on. He looked at her. She had crossed the room and was laying aside her wraps. A stubborn strand of gold had gotten from its proper place and had curled itself gracefully on her brow; the cold air had so rudely pinched her cheeks that they rivaled a peach in color; and those eyes—beautiful blue eyes, with their great depth—was he mistaken? No, he was not. They were swimming in tears. Could it be that

she was weeping because he had not gone on and told her more? Oh, how he longed to take her in his arms and kiss those tears away while he laid his heart bare before her! He half rose from the chair, as if he would go to her; but the pain in his foot brought him to himself, and he fell back weakly. The girl noticed the movement and, with a look of alarm on her face, hurried to his side as she said:

"What are you trying to do? You should know better than to try to get up. If you want anything I will get it for you."

"Roxy, I—" but he never finished the sentence, for just then Uncle Jim came in from the kitchen, saying:

"Teacher, the 's a man out hayr whut wants ter see yer. Wy, howdy, Roxy!" as he saw her. "Come right in," he continued, addressing some one in the kitchen. Presently the ungainly figure of Jake Whiteside slouched into the room. He returned the salutation of Ray and Roxy with a simple "Howdy," then stood twirling his hat in his hand and looking wildly about as if suspicious of danger lurking about.

"Did you want to speak to me about something?" asked Ray, kindly. Jake assented by a jerk of his head.

"Well, what is it?" asked the master, after a pause, as Jake remained silent.

"Can't tell no one but ye," replied Jake, casting a sidelong glance at Roxy and Uncle Jim.

"We 'll go out in the kitchen," said Roxy, turning to Uncle Jim. They both left the room, shutting the door behind them. As soon as he was alone with the master, Jake came forward and, with eyes roving about the room, he said:

"Hes ever'body gone?"

"Yes."

"Shore the' ain't anybody else in hayr?"

"Quite sure."

"Hes the devil been 'round hayr of late?" Jake's eyes still roved suspiciously around the room, as if he was not quite satisfied that they were alone.

"No, Jake, you need n't be afraid of any one being around here. So tell me what it is."

"Wall, yer know hit pays ter be keerful these days, fer the devil is around a heap, an' I 'low

he 's doin' some mighty big things. Yer see, I was ketched by him once, an' I do n't figger on him gittin' me ag'in; so I 'm lookin' out fer him more 'n them whut hain't been ketched by him." He stopped to take another look around the room, as if to assure himself that no one had entered while he was speaking. As Ray watched him pityingly, he felt that Jake had something of importance to tell him amidst these foolish babblings and was anxious for him to continue. Presently Jake leaned forward so that his mouth was very near the teacher's ear, and said in a hoarse whisper:

"Teacher, the devil 's on yer trail, and I come hayr ter warn yer, so 's he won't git a chance ter sarve yer like he done me once." Ray gave a start as the strange words fell on his ear. As soon as Jake delivered his message he straightened up quickly and again looked suspiciously around the room.

"How do you know this, Jake?"

" 'Cause I heard him telling some of his imps."

"Where did you see him?"

"I ain't seed him. I jist heerd him, an' then I run, fer I did n't wanter git ketched ag'in by him."

"How did you know it was him?"

"Lordy, teacher, I 'low I ourghter know his voice."

"But where were you when you heard him?"

Ray was determined to find out if there was anything in all this strange warning.

"I was a-huntin', and come out to the aidg of the bluff jist over the mill afore I knowed hit. Hit was jist gittin' dark, an' I heerd sompin' down below, but did n't know jist whut hit was. I lent over the big rock jist above the mill, an' then I knowed whar I was, an' ef I 'd knowed hit before I 'd never looked over. Jist then I heerd a voice say, 'We 've got ter git rid of thet dammed teacher.' Then I knowed who 't was, an' I pulled out. I 'lowed I ourghter tell yer, so 's yer could look out fer him." When he had finished he began to twirl his hat again and let his eyes rove about the room. Ray plied him with many more questions, but he could get nothing further from him. To many

of them he responded foolishly. After a few moments he started toward the door, as he said:

“ 'Low I 'll be gittin' along now.” Then, as he stood in the door, he added in a loud whisper, “Look out fer the devil,” and was gone.

As soon as he was left alone Ray began to try and unravel the strange words of Jake, for he was sure that there was something more to them than a wild fancy of a deranged mind. It was at the mill Jake had heard it. He had seen Sam Carson there one night himself; had seen him have a mysterious meeting with other men. Then he thought of Bill Rupert's threat the night of his accident. Putting ends together, he decided that Rupert and Carson and others that he did not know were the devil and imps of which Jake had spoken, and they were trying to arrange some plan whereby they could make him leave the country. As he thought of it his blood boiled within his veins. Why did they want him to go? He had not given them any cause to be offended at him. Somehow he felt that Sam Carson was at the bottom of it all. He was shrewd and was using these ignorant

young men of the hills for his own advantage, no doubt; and he felt that the teacher's influence would counteract his own, and would finally overthrow him completely; so the best thing to do was to run him out of the country. Thus thought Ray. He fully decided that, do what they might, he would not go. He felt that he had begun a work that was pleasing to his Heavenly Father, and he knew that it was His will that he stay here; for he had heard Him calling, and felt that while he had not given up the battle with duty, yet that he surely must in the end. He had already worked a marvelous change in the Simpson family; he was trying earnestly to help the pupils of the school, and wanted, if possible, to bring home Uncle Jim's prodigal son. He had been writing to the different detective agencies, and he was sure, if he could find his whereabouts, that he could influence him to come home. He had even tried to help Rupert. He had decided that he would do all the good he could while his term of school lasted, whether he gave up his ambition for the future or not; so he determined not to go before

his time was up. And how could he leave Roxy? But he felt that he must not think of her, or it would weaken his purpose to play fair with Rupert and give him a chance to be a man worthy of her. Uncle Jim entered, sat down, and began to talk. Ray was very inattentive, for he was watching Roxy through the half open door as she did up the work in the kitchen. After dinner she announced that she was going home, as everybody seemed better, and Aunt Sue said she could manage the remainder of the day without her. As she went out it seemed to Ray that the sunshine was going out of the house, and he settled back moodily into his chair and closed his eyes. Uncle Jim, seating himself on the opposite side of the fireplace, supposed that the master was asleep and kept silent until he found himself nodding; then, laying his old gray head against the back of his chair, he slept soundly.

CHAPTER XIV

JOHN SWEARS ALLEGIANCE

HOW 'S the teacher, Rox?" It was Dan Nettles who asked the question of his sister as the family were seated around the dinner table. Roxy had just come from the Watkins home. For the last few days she had been going down to help Aunt Sue in her morning work, and would return before noon.

"I think he will be able to get back to school in a day or two," she replied; then, turning to her mother, she continued: "Aunt Sue thinks she can manage without me now, as Uncle Jim is able to help her, and Mr. Jones can take care of himself."

"That 's what makes you so solemn, is it? Sorry you ain't going to wait on the teacher any longer?" said Dan, in a teasing way.

Roxy did not reply to Dan's query. The

mother thought she saw tears in her eyes. The other members of the family did not notice it, as they were too busily engaged in eating. After a moment's silence George spoke:

"I saw John Whiteside up at the store this morning, and he 's looking mighty thin."

"Did he say anything about the fight?" asked Dan.

"Not much. Somebody asked him if he knew who did it, and he said he did n't, but guessed he 'd find out before long."

"I 'd hate to be that fellow when he does find it out," commented Dan. "Some say it was Sandy Rowen."

"Hit ain't best fer yer ter 'spress yerself too freely, Dan, 'bout sich things," said the father, looking at his youngest son reprovingly. "Yer might git yerself in trouble."

At the mention of John Whiteside, Roxy had looked up and listened to what was said with interest. She arose from the table, thinking how she might see him, for she had determined to see him and put Lou's case before him. She felt like she was the one to do it, for she

knew John's disposition, and she doubted if he would listen to any explanation the teacher might make. She went upstairs to her own little room, that she might be alone with her thoughts. She seated herself in a low chair beside the one window in the room and looked dreamily down the winding road. Was it the desire to help Lou that made her so anxious to see John? Not altogether that, she had to confess to herself, but partly to help the teacher. With quick intuition she had seen a dark cloud gathering over him. The gang that was a terror to the country was at work against him, and she knew that when they undertook a thing they generally carried it out. If John could be gotten right with the teacher he would be such a help, for he was a constant source of worry to the gang. He had a suspicion that it was the treatment that his brother Jake had received at their hands that had caused him to lose his power of reason, and now it was generally thought that a member of the gang had tried to kill John, and if all this could be proved it would be a bad thing for the band of evildoers.

John was held in high esteem by all the people of the community, and would have a large following in anything he undertook. If he could be led to espouse the cause of the teacher it would mean victory for the latter. Roxy felt that he must be won over, and the teacher must not be harmed or run from the neighborhood, for she was sure that God wanted him to do a work there that no one else could do. When she thought of harm coming to him, tears filled her eyes. She loved him, even if he did not return it, and she could not bear the thought of seeing him suffer. She arose, threw on a wrap, and went downstairs, for she felt that she could not sit still and think of it all. She must be moving about. She heard her mother softly singing in the kitchen as she let herself out of the front door. Down the walk to the gate and out into the road she went. The sky was overcast with heavy clouds, and it looked like it would snow at any moment. As she walked along, the voice of the woods called to her. Some snowbirds hopped about on the ground just ahead of her; a covey of quail arose with

a whirring sound at her approach; a chattering squirrel sat on a limb watching her curiously. As she turned a bend in the road the clatter of hoofs fell upon her ear. She looked down the road and saw a man on horseback approaching. As he drew nearer she recognized John Whiteside. He looked pale and gaunt, and Roxy thought she noticed a sad expression about his usually stern eyes. They had always been good friends, and so she addressed him in her usually friendly manner:

“How are you, John? I ’m glad to see you out again.”

“Wy, howdy, Roxy! I ain’t feelin’ jist es peart es I might, but ’low I ’m gittin’ ’long ’bout es well es can be ’spected, cornsiderin’ ever’-thing.” He had stopped his horse and had changed his position in the saddle. “Whar yer goin’?” he asked, abruptly.

“I—I—Oh,” she stammered, “I was taking a little walk. Somehow I love to be out in the open air in all kinds of weather.” She was somewhat confused at the query. Here was the man she had so much desired to see; and now

that the opportunity had been given her to do what she felt no one else could do, she hardly knew just how to proceed. John was preparing to move one. She could not let this opportunity slip. She must speak to him now; so she began, quickly:

"John, I have something that I would like to say to you."

"All right, fire away."

"You know," she began, "I am your friend, and what I am about to say is because of that." John nodded and looked curious. She continued: "You think Lou Simpson has been turned from you by the teacher." At the mention of Lou's name his face clouded. "You believe it partly because of the indiscreet way in which she acted and partly because of what has been told you. I know positively that you have a wrong impression."

"How d'yer know hit?" he asked, rather sharply.

"Because, in the first place, Mr. Jones is a gentleman, and no gentleman would do such a thing."

"Purty gentleman," sneered John.

"And in the second place Lou says he has not done so."

"Wall, what makes her act like she 's been doin'? She do n't have nuthin' ter do with me any more."

"Have you given her a chance to have anything to do with you lately?" And then, without waiting for him to reply, she told him the story as Lou had told it to her, how nobly Ray had acted toward Lou, and instead of turning her from John, had taught her to love him. With much feeling she told the listening giant the story. Ray could not have had a more eloquent tongue to defend him. John listened to every word attentively, and when she had finished he said:

"An' she tole yer thet, did she?"

"Yes, and if you will give her a chance she will tell you the same thing."

"Wall, Roxy, ef thet 's true, an' I hain't no reason ter doubt yer, I shore do 'low thet teacher air a gen'leman, an' I ourghter 'pologize ter him right away."

"It 's all true, John, every word of it, and I felt you should know it. Mr. Jones was going to tell you as soon as he saw you, but I was almost sure you would not give him a chance, and poor Lou could not; so I felt that I must."

"Roxy," said John, getting slowly down from his horse, "you shore air one good girl." Taking off his hat, he approached her with outstretched hand. The snow had begun to fall, but neither of them noticed it. She put her soft white hand into his big rough one, and for a moment his big bushy head was bent forward, and she felt his cold lips touch it. She did not withdraw her hand, for she knew that the act was prompted by the genuine gratitude of an honest heart. He raised his head and said:

"Yer cain't never tell jist what yer saved me from, fer I had jist 'bout made up my mind that this world was too little fer me an' him, an 'ef I could n't hev Lou he could n't nuther." A shudder passed through her frame at these words. He felt it, for he still held her hand. "I know hit was turrible ter think of, but I 've been nigh 'bout crazy; fer, Roxy, I shore do

love Lou. Now, I want to tell yer one thing," he added, solemnly, "I 'm goin' ter stand by thet teacher jist es long es I 've got breath in my body. I 'll show 'em whurther er not they run him outen this place so easy." The fire flashed from his eye, and his voice sounded like distant thunder. "Ef them low-down devils tech a har on his head they 'll hear from John Whiteside." He released her hand, shook the snow from his shaggy locks, slapped his hat down on his head, and mounted his horse. "Good-bye, Roxy! I 'll never fergit ye fer whut you 've done fer me." His horse was moving up the road. For a moment she stood watching until the horse and rider had disappeared, then she started for home with a prayer of thanksgiving in her heart. When she entered the house her mother was sitting before the fire doing some mending.

"Where have you been, child?" she asked, as she looked up from her work.

"Oh, I was just out for a little walk, mother."

She threw aside her wrap and came and sat

down on a stool at her mother's feet; the light from the blazing logs in the fireplace fell upon her fair young face. The mother watched her fondly for a moment; then, laying her hand lovingly on her golden head, she said:

"What is it, dear? Something has been troubling you of late?"

"Mother, I have never kept anything from you, so I will tell you." She told to her listening mother the story that Lou had told her the day the two girls had gone in search of the teacher. Then she told her of her recent meeting with John, adding:

"I believe that Providence led me this afternoon." The mother watched her tenderly as she spoke. When she had finished, the girl turned her face to the fire and watched the flickering light.

"Roxy," said the mother, "have you told me all?"

"All, mother?" questioned the girl, as she looked into her mother's face.

"Yes, daughter; I think you are keeping something from me." The girl's face glowed

red in the firelight. Then, hiding it in her mother's lap, she began to weep.

"I think I can read your thoughts, daughter," she said, as she stroked her daughter's head. "Is it true?"

"Yes, mother."

Mother and daughter sat long in the firelight that wintry afternoon, conversing in that silent language that only hearts perfectly attuned are able to understand.

CHAPTER XV

THE BURNING OF THE SCHOOL- HOUSE



IT was Friday afternoon, and school had been dismissed. Ray had been teaching only two days since his recovery, and he had been doing that on sheer nerve, as he was still weak and had to use a stick in walking. His ankle still pained him when he bore his weight on it. He was glad it was Friday, for now he would have two days in which to rest his ankle, and he was sure that it would be a great benefit to it, for he had been walking and standing on it too much. He had again taken up his abode at Simpson's. On the evening of his arrival there he was surprised to see John Whiteside approach the house and come in. He was in his room at the time, and could see John's approach from the window of his room. He had heard him speak a few words to the family as he entered the house, and then he knocked at the door of Ray's room. As

the latter rose to open it he hardly knew just what to expect, for he had not heard of Roxy's meeting with John. As he entered the room he offered his hand to the teacher and said:

"Teacher, I 've come down ter 'poligize fer the way I 've done yer." And then Ray learned all about how Roxy had cleared up the misunderstanding. He could still feel John's hearty handclasp and hear his rough, kind words as they parted:

"Teacher, yer a man all over, an' ef yer ever need me, jist lemme know, fer I 'd go through hell fer yer. I 'low I 'm jist 'bout the happiest man in this whole place, fer ye 've showed Lou how ter love me right, an' I do n't mind tellin' yer thet she 's goin' ter marry me right soon."

Ray thought of it all again as he sat by his desk that Friday evening after school was over. It made his heart glad to know of all that Roxy had done for him. Perhaps he would have failed in his effort to help John and Lou, had it not been for her. How she could help him all through life if she was only his! He was

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so lost in his reverie that he did not notice the approaching darkness, and when he finally roused himself it was almost dark. He arose, hobbled out of the schoolhouse, and locked the door behind him. He had hardly disappeared down the dark woods path when a dark figure came from the woods on the opposite side of the house and stealthily approached. The figure carried a bundle under his arm, and when he came up to the building he placed it on the ground under one corner. A light flared for a moment, as if a match had been lighted; then a faint red gleam appeared. The figure quickly disappeared in the woods.

Ray walked on very slowly. Twice he had to stop to rest his ankle. Considerable time passed before he came out of the woods. He crossed the little field that bordered the creek, and as he approached the footbridge he saw a man running toward it from the opposite side. The man seemed in a hurry; so Ray stopped to let him cross first. When he came across to where the other stood, he paused and said in an excited voice:

"Mr. Jones, do you not see the fire?" It was Sam Carson who spoke. Ray turned and looked in the direction indicated by the other. As he did so, the sight that met his eyes filled him with amazement. Just over the top of the trees in the direction of the schoolhouse a great light illuminated the sky.

"It must be the schoolhouse," said Carson, as he started on. "I 'll hurry on, as I might be of some assistance."

Ray stood leaning against the handrail of the bridge for support. He was trembling in every limb from excitement and exhaustion. Every moment the sky was getting lighter. He must go back; but how could he? If it was the schoolhouse it would be burnt down before he could manage to get half way back. At that moment his ear caught the sound of a horse's hoofs coming down the hill on the opposite side of the creek. Some one was riding rapidly toward the creek. Ray could hear the splash of the water as he crossed a few yards below the footbridge. Perhaps the horseman would assist him. As he came out of the creekbed and

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started up the hill toward the woods, Ray hailed him. He stopped his horse and shouted:

"Who 's thar?"

"It 's Jones, the teacher. Can you give me a lift toward the fire."

"Wall, I jist 'low I 'd be a ornery sneak ef I did n't." The horseman was riding toward the teacher as he spoke. "Gimme yer hand, teacher, an' put yer foot in thet stirrup, an' lemme help yer up, fer ole roan can carry us both."

"Why, John, is it you?" said Ray, as he found himself astride the horse behind John Whiteside.

"Hit shore air. Be yer jist gittin' home from skeul?"

"Yes. I did not start until dark, and it has taken me an unreasonably long time to come this distance on account of my ankle."

"I 'low thet hit's the skeulhouse thet's burnin'."

"I suppose it is; but I can't see how it caught, for the fire in the stove was almost out when I left."

"Thar 's a lot of things happen 'round hayr thet can't in no way be reckoned on." John's tone made the master ask quickly:

"Do you suspect any one of setting it on fire, John?"

"Nope, jist know hit."

"Whom do you think it could be?"

"Wall, I would n't like ter say jist yit, but yer keep yer eyes skinned an' yer ears open, an' yer 'll larn some things thet 'll s'prise yer, I 'low."

They were now only a few rods from the schoolhouse, and they could see it in flames through the leafless trees. As they came out into the little clearing they saw that quite a crowd had gathered about the burning building; but all were standing idly by, not attempting to save the building, as any attempt would be useless.

"Yer 'd better stay on ole Roan, teacher, fer yer can't do no good gittin' down, an' it 'll make yer foot hurt fer nuthin'. I 'll jist git down myself an' look 'round a bit," said John, dismounting.

"All right; I believe it will be better for me up here."

John left him and joined a group of men nearer the fire. Ray climbed over into the saddle and made himself as comfortable as possible. People were arriving from every direction, mostly men, for only a few women had been brave enough to face the cold and darkness. Everybody looked excited in the fierce glare of the fire. All were moving about restlessly to find some one else who could give them something they had not heard about the fire. As the faces were lighted up by the fire, Ray was able to recognize many of them. He saw the two Nettles boys in a group of men that had formed around Lige Westwood, who was commenting very freely on how the fire might have started. One of the Jeffersons and two of the Handlans were listening to Sandy Rowen's version of the subject. Bill Rupert and Sam Carson had withdrawn from all the rest and were conversing together. Finally Ray, who was watching them more closely than any of the rest, saw them separate and begin to mingle with the others. As

Carson moved about in a careless manner, Ray was sure that the careless manner was only assumed, and underneath was the subtlety of a serpent. He seemed careful to avoid engaging himself in conversation with John Whiteside. Ray felt that, somehow, Carson had a hand in the burning. His suspicion of his character had been growing in Ray's mind ever since their first meeting.

"How are you, Mr. Jones?" Ray was so intent on watching the actions of Carson that he was not aware of the approach of Dan Nettles.

"Oh, I 'm getting along all right."

"This is hard luck for us all," continued Dan, as he put his hand on old Roan's neck.

"How do you suppose it happened?"

"I can't imagine," replied Ray. "I did n't leave here till dark, and the fire in the stove was almost out when I left. It started soon after I left, for I had n't got home when I found it out. Of course, I was not able to walk fast on account of my ankle. I met John coming to the fire; so came back with him." While he was speaking to Dan, Westwood had come

up, and Ray turned to him as he said, "Rather unfortunate affair, is n't it?"

"I 'low 't will be fer somebody," was the meaning reply.

"Do you suppose some one set it on fire?" asked Ray.

"I ain't s'posin' nuthin', but I can't figure out how hit 'ud ketch by himself. I 'low yer allus keerful 'bout the fire, ain't yer? Jest like I tole yer ter be."

"I certainly am careful," replied Ray, rather sharply, for he was somewhat irritated that the director would for a moment question his carefulness. "I was just telling Dan that I did n't leave here until dark, and the fire in the stove was almost out when I left."

"Ye did n't git clar home, did yer, 'fore you come back?" Ray thought he noticed a note of triumph in the other's voice as he asked the question. On receiving a negative reply the director continued:

"Hit 's funny yer did n't notice nuthin' 'fore yer left, fer hit shorely had ter git a hoop on himself ter ketch, an' nigh burn down 'fore yer

got ter the little crick on yer way home." How did this man know where he had got to? Then he thought of his meeting with Carson at the footbridge. That explained it. Carson had told him about it. But why was the director questioning him so closely? He was indignant and was about to reply hotly, but on second thought decided that it was best to control his feelings; so he replied, quietly:

"I am lame, Mr. Westwood, and had to walk very slowly. I stopped twice on my way to rest my ankle, and, of course, it took me some time to walk that distance."

"I would n't 'a' 'lowed ye 'd 'a' stayed hayr so long when yer foot was in sich a condition." Ray thought he noticed a sneer in the man's voice, and he could not refrain from saying, rather sharply:

"It 's my business just how long I stay here."

"So 't is," replied the director, as he moved off; "but hit might be somebody's else's 'fore long." Ray did not reply. The truth flashed upon him. He was suspected as the incendiary, and the circumstances were against him. He

looked around for Dan, but he was gone. He had walked away as soon as Westwood had begun to talk.


The fire had reached its crest and was slowly dying out, and the people were gradually leaving. Presently John approached and said:

"Wall, I 'low we 'll go now." Ray resumed his seat back of the saddle, and John mounted. As they were leaving the clearing Ray cast a sad glance at the ruins. For the first time in the four months he had been teaching here did he realize that he loved the spot and the work he was doing. The ride homeward was a silent one, as both men were occupied with their thoughts. Ray thanked John for his assistance as he dismounted at the Simpson gate.

"Do n't mention hit, teacher. I 'low yer 'll need me some more 'fore yer through with them dirty devils; but do n't yer fergit thet John Whiteside 's yer friend, an' 'll go through hell fer yer ef yer need him." He gave his horse a jerk with the bits, and as he went up the road Ray heard him say, as if to himself, "Thet 's ther game, be hit. Wall, I 'll show 'em."

CHAPTER XVI

UNDER A CLOUD

RS. SIMPSON was sweeping the front porch. She paused a moment to look down the road. A man was coming up the hill. Shading her eyes, she looked intently at him a moment, and then said to herself:

“Thet ’s Lige Westwood. Wonder whar he ’s goin’ up this-a-way?” She leaned on her broomhandle to await his coming, for she was not the kind of a woman to let folks pass when there was an opportunity for gathering in news. That article was scarce enough anyway in that community, and she had an unappeasable appetite for it. She intended to hail Westwood if he attempted to pass without stopping, and for that reason she walked slowly toward the gate, pretending to sweep the walk as she went.

As she neared the gate she saw that he had no intention of passing, for he turned from the road and was coming her way.

"Howdy, Mis' Simpson!" he said, in his bland way. "'Pears like yer workin' powerful brisk this mornin'."

"Yas," she replied, leaning on the broom-handle; "hit shore does keep one a-movin' ter keep things decent."

Westwood leaned up against the gate, as if he was not in any hurry and was preparing for a comfortable chat. Nothing could have pleased the lady better than this prospect for news.

"Won't yer come in the house?" she said, feeling her responsibility as hostess.

"Naw; I 'low hit ain't wuth while fer whut time I'd stay;" and then, without giving her a chance to begin a series of questions, as she was preparing to do, he continued, "So the teacher 's pulled out, hes he?"

"Wy, yes; he 's gone ter Union on a leetle business."

"I 'low hit air a leetle business, but hit 'll

take a long time ter do it," he replied, with a knowing look.

"Wall, I do n't know jist how long he 'll be gone, but I do n't 'low it 'll be more 'n a week."

"Do n't yer know whut tuk him?"

"All I know 'bout hit air thet he got a letter t' other day thet 'peared ter work him up terrible, an' hit 'peared like he could n't git away fast ernuff. He said he hated ter leave in a time like this, but jist had ter. Then I jist up an' ast him whut hit was thet was takin' him so suddent, an' he said thet he could n't tell jist yet, but thet when he come back thet he 'd hev a great surprise fer the folks 'round hayr."

"Look hayr, Mis' Simpson; do n't yer know thet he hain't comin' back ter this place no more?"

"Why ain't he?" said the woman, in surprise. "He 's left his things hayr."

"Wall, thet hain't nuthin'. He can better afford ter lose them things than his hide."

"Whut d' yer mean, man?" Her curiosity was almost overcoming her.

"I mean thet he burnt the skeulhouse, an' ef he had n't left hayr when he did, thet there 'd been some trouble fer him."

"O Lordy! D'ye 'low he done it? I'd never 'lowed hit of him," replied the woman, as if thunderstricken.

"Hit ain't nobody else. Sam Carson met him crossin' thet bridge, an' he said thet the teacher acted es ef he had n't seed the fire tel Carson pinte hit out ter him. He said hisself thet he had n't left thar tel a'ter dark, an' yer know thet he never got home afore the fire." He looked off down the road with a self-satisfied air, as if he had proved the teacher's guilt beyond a doubt.

"Wall, I would n't never 'a' 'lowed hit of him, but hit 'pears like hit's true, from whut yer say," said the woman, shaking her head sadly.

"'Course hit's so. Can't be no doubt 'bout hit. Wy, ever'body in the whole deestrect 'lows hit's so;" and then he added, in a martyr-like tone: "Ef the board hed listened ter me we'd hed our skeulhouse, fer I was ag'in' hirin' him.

Mebbe the 'll git ter thinkin' thet I know sumpin' arter while." He turned as if to go, and continued: "Wall, I 'low I 'd better be gittin' 'long up ter Whiteside's, fer we 've got ter make some arrangements 'bout the skeul, I 'low. Wonder how Phil Nettles feels 'bout hirin' him now? Good-bye! I hope the' 's 'nuff left in his things ter pay yer his board bill."

Mrs. Simpson made no reply to the last remark. She watched the man go up the road until he disappeared behind some trees. She was still dazed by the news. She had put so much confidence in the teacher, and now to think of what he had done was too much for her comprehension. The thought of it not being true never entered her mind. She was such a woman as accepted everything she heard as if it were gospel truth. She turned and went into the house with a sad heart. Lou was in the kitchen singing at her work. She looked at her mother as she entered, and her troubled face made her stop in the midst of her song.

"What on earth has happened, mother?" she said.

"Lou, the teacher hes run away, fer hit was him thet burnt the skeulhouse." She sank into a chair beside the door as she spoke.

"What do you mean, mother?" asked the girl, excitedly.

Then the mother told her daughter what she had just heard from the director concerning Ray's guilt. During the recital the girl stood with bated breath, a look of fiery indignation growing in her eyes, which the mother thought was against the teacher, who had proved to be such a sneak. She added: "Hit 's too bad he 's sich a low-down sneak, hain't it?"

"Mother, why do you say that? Surely you do n't believe all these lies you have heard," said Lou, in a pained voice.

"Wy, of course I b'leve hit. They say thet the circumstances air ag'in' him, an' ever'body in the deestrick 'lows hit 's so. Hit shorely must be so." The mother seemed surprised that the girl questioned it for a moment.

"I do n't care what the circumstances may be or what people think. I do n't believe he is guilty," replied the daughter, with vehemence.

"Wy, Lou; I 'm shore s'prised at yer. He 's gone, knowin' thet all this talk is goin' 'round 'bout him. Ef he ain't guilty, whut 'ud he leave fer at sich a time?"

"He had business, very important business, just as he said, or he never would have left. He will be back in two or three days, for he has been gone three days already, and you know he said that he would be back inside of a week, and I know he will come, if possible."

"Wall, I hope yer right in yer way o' thinkin'; but I 'm mighty feared yer ain't," she replied, as she picked up a pan of shelled corn and went out the back door to the chicken house. As she scattered the yellow grains before the greedy fowls her mind was in a whirl. Westwood had caused her to think that the teacher was guilty, and now Lou had defended him so stanchly that she did not know just what to believe about it all. Lou was unlike her mother in this, for when she had made up her mind about anything it was very hard to change it. She felt sure that the gang that was the terror of the community was at the bottom of it all,

and she indulged in some very indignant thoughts concerning them. While she was thus engaged she heard some one whistle out toward the front gate. On going to the front door she saw it was John Whiteside, and her face immediately lighted up with a smile as she said, "Come on in, John." She went out to meet him with both hands outstretched. He took her hands in his, and she led him toward the house.

"I did n't know ef yer wanted me ter come in er not," he said, rather sheepishly.

"Oh, I 'm so glad you have come, John, for I have just heard some awful things about Mr. Jones, and I wanted to talk to you about them."

"Yer need n't tell me, fer I already know," he replied. "Lige Westwood come up ter the house and was tellin' paw a whole lot of stuff, an', of course, paw b'l'eves hit all. I heerd Lige say thet he 'd been down hayr an' made yer maw think hit was so. Yer do n't b'l'ever hit, d' yer, Lou?"

"Not a word of it, John," she replied, firmly.

"Wall, I 'm powerful glad thet yer do n't, fer if yer did, hit 'ud make hit mighty hard fer me ter stand by him an' yer not b'l'eving in him. I wish he 'd come back soon, fer hit 's hard ter make other folks b'l'eve he ain't guilty and him gone."

"Do n't you worry, John, for he 'll be back in a short time. Oh, I 'm so glad that you believe in him, for there is an awful cloud hanging over him, and he needs friends who will stand by him!" The two sweethearts talked long and tenderly of their future happiness and of the one who had helped them so much.

On that same day Roxy sat in her little room alone. She had tried to read, but the book lay on her lap unnoticed. Her eyes were red, as if she had been weeping, and she was looking listlessly out of the window at the barren trees. She felt that they were sympathetic friends, for she had never felt such a bleak barrenness in her life as she did at that moment. She had heard of the cloud of suspicion that overshadowed the teacher, and she had heard just

that morning that he had left the country. She still believed in him. She knew that he had never burned the schoolhouse; but why was he gone? Surely he could have explained his absence to some one. Perhaps he had gotten disgusted with the people for so unjustly accusing him of things he had never done, and had decided to leave forever. As she thought of it all, her cherished plans for the uplift of the people seemed blasted. He had done so much for them, but had only opened up the way for a larger service; and now he was gone. Why? That was the unanswerable question that was ever recurring to her thoughts. "He will come back; he must come back," her heart cried out within her. The tears broke out afresh and rolled down her cheeks. She wiped them away and continued to look out of the window. She saw two men come out of the woods and walk up the road in the direction of her home. As they came nearer she saw that it was Sam Carson and Bill Rupert. A shudder passed through her. She did not hate any one; but to her the two men were repulsive. She shrank from them.

as a dove might shrink from a serpent. She felt that they were responsible for all this harm that had been done against Ray. Her brother Dan was going out toward the gate. Roxy saw the two men stop and speak to him. Then, as Dan leaned against the gate, they came up to where he stood, and Carson seemed to be talking earnestly to him; and while she could not hear what was said, she was sure that it was about the burning of the schoolhouse, for Carson pointed in that direction several times as he talked. Presently the two moved off up the road and Dan came into the house. Her father and George were inside waiting for dinner. She heard Dan speak to them as he entered: "Well, Carson says it is a clear case against the teacher. He says that he has heard that this is not the first time he has committed crime, and that he is wanted back in Illinois for something he did before he came out here, and he has just been hiding from the authorities. He said that Joe Simpson told him that the reason the teacher left so suddenly was, he received a letter calling him to Union on business. He said that he

seemed very much excited over it and left that evening, telling them that he would be back in a few days. Carson says that the men up around Spring Bluff all believe that it was a letter warning him that the authorities from Illinois were on his trail."

Then the fair listener upstairs heard her father reply: "Wall, hit shore is strange why he left so suddent like, 'specially when he knowed the' was a suspicion agin' him about burnin' down the skeulhouse."

"Well, father," asked George, "do you suppose that he did it?"


"I can't say he did, ner I can't say he did n't," was the reply. "Things look mighty bad fer him. My 'pinion of him hes allus been fust rate, and I wish ef hit hed been possible thet he hed stayed and clared it all up."

Just then the mother's voice was heard calling to dinner, and Roxy hastily wiped her eyes and went down to join the family around the table. They were all seated when she entered. Her father was telling the boys of some work he had planned for the afternoon; so they did

not pay any attention to her as she entered, but she knew that her mother's eyes were on her. She glanced at her kind face and saw those sympathetic eyes looking at her. Then she dropped hers, for they were filling with tears. She was glad when the meal was finished, for the men went out, and she was left alone with her mother. The latter took her daughter in her arms and kissed her as she said, "Roxy, dear, remember that there is not a cloud so dark but that it has a silver lining."

CHAPTER XVII

AT THE OLD MILL

T was getting late in the afternoon. Darkness was rapidly settling down in the valleys amid the hills. A lone traveler was walking along the valley road. He had crossed Spring Creek at the mill and was moving onward up the road. He could hear the cry of a catamount somewhere in the hill above him. It had been following him up there among the rocks and trees for some time. He was trying to get to a house before nightfall, for he knew that darkness would make the beast bolder, and it would more than likely attack him. A fight with a catamount was not to his liking, armed only with a hickory stick, which he used to assist him in walking, for one might notice a limp in his gait. Again the weird cry broke the stillness; this time nearer than before. He

could not go any faster on account of his lameness, and he dared not stop. Presently his attention was caught by a low growl coming from the bushes by the roadside, not ten feet away. He turned his eyes toward the spot and saw a low-crouching figure moving along parallel with him. He saw that flight was impossible, and there was no other recourse but to fight. Accordingly he faced about and gripped the stick with both hands, swinging it over his shoulder, and stood ready to strike when it became necessary. He saw the wary beast stop and assume a crouching position. He knew it was ready for a spring, and his only hope was in sidestepping and hitting it with his stick as it passed. Before he hardly realized it he saw a body passing through the air, and felt something like fur brush his cheek. He had successfully sidestepped, and only the tip of the creature's tail had brushed his face; but he had failed to use his stick. He quickly turned about to face the attack from the other side of the road. As he did so he saw the beast leave the ground as it sprang at him again. This time he swung a

vicious blow at it that caught it in the middle part of the body. The animal gave a yell of pain as it half fell among the bushes. The man knew that the blow had only been the means of making it angry, and it would be even bolder than it had been. However, the blow had been enough to keep it from springing at him again immediately, and in the respite he had time to brace himself for a final stroke. When the catamount finally sprang, his stick met it fairly between the eyes, and it fell limply into the road at the man's feet. Instantly his stick was descending upon its head in sharp quick blows. When he stooped to examine it he found that its head had been crushed.

The man turned his face up the road and continued his journey until he arrived at the Simpson place, where he turned in. He opened the door without knocking and found the family gathered around the fire. Mrs. Simpson was knitting as she engaged Joe in conversation, while Lou was reading a book. They had not heard the approach of the man, and were surprised when he entered.

"Why, if it is n't Mr. Jones!" said Lou, as she dropped her book and came toward him with extended hand. "We are so glad to see you. Your week is up to-morrow."

"I 'low he 's hungry, Lou, ef he 's walked all the way from Union to-day," said Mrs. Simpson, as she started for the kitchen in confusion, for it was like one arising from the dead for her to see Ray again, as she had fully made up her mind that he had gone for good. "Come right in the kitchen, and I 'll set you out some supper."

"All right, for I 'm hungry enough to eat the catamount I killed down the road just a little while ago," said Ray, pleasantly.

"Did yer kill a catamount?" asked Joe. "I betcher hit 's the one I saw down at the mill tother week."

"It was just a short distance this side of the mill where I killed it."

Ray ate his supper as he talked to the family of his trip; but in all that he said he did not mention his reason for going so suddenly. After supper he went to bed, saying that he was tired.

The next morning he arose rather late, and when he went out to breakfast he found all the family out save Lou. He greeted her so cheerily that she thought he did not know of the cloud that was overshadowing him, and she was wondering whether or not she had better tell him. Her face wore such a solemn expression that he noticed and remarked on it. "What is the matter, Lou? You look so sad."

"I was just worrying about you, Mr. Jones. Perhaps you do n't know that nearly everybody thinks you burnt the schoolhouse," replied the girl.

"Well, I did not know it was so bad as that. Of course, I knew there were a few who thought I was guilty. But what do you think about it?"

"I? Why, Mr. Jones, I'm ashamed of you to think that you would have the least doubt of my faith in you," she said, reproachfully.

"I did n't doubt you, Lou," he said, looking at her gratefully; "but it does me good to hear you say that you trust me." And then, as if half to himself, he said, "I wonder what Roxy thinks?"

"I have n't seen her lately, but I 'm sure she thinks just as I do about it," said the girl.

"And John," he continued, musingly, "dear old John? I know what he thinks. 'Teacher, I'll go through hell fer ye,'"—he repeated John's words almost reverently—"and I know he 'd do it." Then he added, in a brisk tone: "What care I what the rest think when I have three such stanch friends—or, I should have said five, for I know that Uncle Jim and Aunt Sue are still my friends. Lou," he continued, "I 'm not worrying about this, for I know that I am innocent, and I know that God needs me here. I am willing to stay and do the work He wants me to do here, and I am sure that He will take care of me." Then he added, with a twinkle in his eye, "I am going to spring a surprise on this neighborhood that will make some folks mighty glad."

"What is it?" asked the girl.

"I can't tell you just yet, but you just wait. It won't be long until you shall know. I 'm going down on Spring Creek now," he said, as he arose from the table, "and I may not be back

until to-morrow." Then, walking over to Lou, he took both her hands and, looking down into her earnest eyes, said, "Lou, you are a good girl, and I am so glad you love John, for I love you both, my dear, good friends." The girl's eyes filled with tears of gratitude as he turned to go. She watched him go down the hill, and then turned back to her work, softly singing a hymn he had taught her:

When I fear my faith will fail,
Christ will hold me fast.
When the tempter would prevail,
He can hold me fast.

It is needless to say that Ray was received very warmly by his two old friends on Spring Creek. The day was spent very pleasantly by the three. Ray told them all about his trip, but refrained from stating the reason for going at such a time. He said to them, as he had said to Lou, that some folks would be greatly surprised very soon. Late in the afternoon Roxy came, and the greeting between the two young people was somewhat restrained. Ray was quick to notice that there was some reserve about

her. The usual frankness was not there. It worried him, and he determined to find out the cause for this change as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

The snow had almost disappeared. The air, while it was still sharp, had a certain softness about it that was suggestive of spring, and it was very pleasant to be out-of-doors. It was sunset as the two started out for the walk. Their steps were directed toward the mill.

"I wanted to ask you what you think of this cloud of suspicion that is hovering about me?" he began, abruptly. "I knew you would be frank about it and tell me just how you feel."

The girl lifted her blue eyes to his as she replied: "Mr. Jones, you ought to know that I trust you and that I believe all this report concerning you is untrue."

"But you know the circumstances are against me."

"Yes; but that matters not with me. The only thing that I could not understand was why you left so suddenly at such a time without saying anything to me—your friends about it. It

made it so hard on your friends in defending you, as they did not know where you were gone or why." And then she added softly, "I never thought of doubting you."

"Roxy, I'm going to tell you why I went away so mysteriously, but it must be a secret for the present."

"I promise to keep it."

They were near the mill. Night had settled down, but a full moon appeared in the east, and its silvery rays were flooding the valley. The couple had stopped now and were facing each other. A moonbeam played in the depth of the girl's wondrous blue eyes as she turned her expectant face upward to his to hear the secret.

"I have found Don Watkins," the words came slowly and clearly.

"Is it true?" She started back in surprise.

"It is true, and that was my mission to Union."

"But where is he?" she asked, quickly.

"That will all be explained in time. Please don't ask me any more about him to-night. Just believe when I say that was my mission to

Union and that I have found him and he is coming home soon."

"I believe you and will wait." Her face was radiant now as she stood in the soft moonlight. Ray wanted to take her in his arms and pour his love into her ear, but duty held him back.

"Look!" she said, stepping quickly into the shadow and pointing to the opposite side of the creek. He looked in the direction indicated and saw two men coming down the road to the ford. At first he did not recognize them, but as they came nearer he saw that it was Sam Carson and Bill Rupert. They crossed the stream on the stepping-stones and were soon concealed from the view of the two in the shadow by the high bank. They were heard to enter the mill, and their voices floated down but indistinctly to Roxy and Ray. Presently other men approached and entered the mill until their number was six.

"Some mischief, Roxy," whispered Ray. "Keep in the shadow and wait for me." Then he slipped stealthily up to the mill and disappeared under it. He was not gone long, but

it seemed an age to the waiting girl. When he came back to her he took her hand, and without a word they rapidly left the spot, careful to keep in the shadow. When they were at a safe distance from the mill he said: "They are planning to rob the postoffice at Spring Bluff tomorrow night. I was under the floor of the mill and could hear them perfectly."

The girl was trembling from head to foot and was very pale when they entered the house, but neither of the old people noticed it.

"If you are going home to-night I'll walk with you," said Ray.

"I'll be very glad of your company," she replied. After she had told the old people good-night, and Ray had told them that he would be back to spend the night with them, they started.

They had climbed the hill and were near the spot where Ray had met Bill Rupert and where a few hours later Roxy and Lou had formed a bond of friendship. Ray took the girl's hand that lay so lightly on his arm and faced her as he said: "Roxy, I can't keep it from you any longer. Listen to what I say. I love

you." The words came slowly, as if he found pleasure in lingering on them. She drooped her head; he drew her unresistingly to him.


"Why did you want to keep it from me?" she said.

"Because I promised Bill Rupert that if he would be a man worthy of you I would not stand in his way in trying to win you. But tonight I am convinced that he is not going to try to be a man."

"Well, if he had tried he could never have won my heart, for it is yours, and has been for quite a while." He kissed her upturned lips tenderly, and they started on. Ray felt as if he was treading a path of roses that night as he returned to Uncle Jim's, after he had lingered long in telling Roxy good-night at her own door.

CHAPTER XVIII

FOILED

HE next morning as John Whiteside was going out to the barn to do the feeding he saw the teacher coming up the hill toward him. John greeted him very cordially and invited him into the house.

“No, John, I would rather go out to the barn with you, for I have something to tell you that no one else must hear just now.”

When they arrived at the barn they seated themselves on the log doorsill and Ray began: “I heard it last night by accident, and it may be a great surprise to you. It is this: there is a plan to rob the Spring Bluff postoffice to-night.” John looked at him curiously. “I know it sounds strange; but you see it is this way.” And Ray told John what he and Roxy had seen

at the mill on the preceding night, and how he had crawled under the mill and had heard the plan.

When he finished, John arose and said: "I 'low the' 're fixin' ter lay sumpin' else on ter yer; but we 'll show 'em this time whut 's whut."

Ray arose and stood beside the giant. He was not a small man himself, and as the two stood side by side they were fair examples of the finished and primitive article.

"But what shall we do about it?" said Ray after a moment's pause.

"Yer jist leave thet ter me, Mister Jones, and there 'll be plenty doin'," replied John, with a twinkle in his eye. "Yer jist go home an' rest, an' do n't yer worry 'bout hit, fer yer 've hed 'bout 'nuff ter worry most men ter death already. I 'll 'tend to 'em."

"But look here, John. If there 's to be an attempt to capture them to-night, remember that I 'm to be counted in, for I made the discovery of the plan, and I want to have a hand in the fun."

"Oh, wall, ef yer determined ter hev a hand

in hit, wy, all right; but let me make all the arrangements fer the s'prise party."

"Of course, I 'll gladly turn the whole thing over to you, knowing that you can manage it better than I can; but I want to be invited to the party, anyway."

"Wall, yer jist go home an' rest easy, an' I 'll call fer yer this evenin'." Then he added, with a look of admiration in his eye, "Yer jist 'bout the grittiest eddicated feller I ever seed."

Ray laughed and said: "You wait, John. You do n't know whether I 'll stand under fire or not."

"Standin' up afore a gun ain't allus a sign of bravery. Hit 's the man thet can't be bluffed outen his job that 's a brave man."

"Well, so long, John. I 'll look for you this evening."

After the teacher had gone, John stood looking out across the sun-kissed valley, where the first signs of spring were beginning to appear. The trees were still bare, but the snow had disappeared, save for little patches here and there, which were rapidly disappearing under the in-

fluence of the sun's rays. The sweet-voiced songsters were beginning the rehearsals of their anthems that should announce the advent of spring. The air had a certain softness that made one feel dreamy. John was not aware of all this as he stood there that morning, for his mind was filled with sterner thoughts than these. He was planning how he might overthrow the evil power that had been wielded over the neighborhood by a gang of lawless men; how he might clear the name of the man who had been a benefactor to the community and had proved to be his best friend. And perhaps in capturing this gang the mystery of his own and his brother's wrong might be solved, for he was sure that this gang was responsible for both. When he had done his feeding he saddled his big roan horse and rode rapidly up the road to Spring Bluff. When he arrived there he found the usual crowd of loafers scattered about the store porch. He dismounted and tied his horse; then he joined them. As he took his seat on the edge of the porch in their midst they greeted him in backwoods style. Pulling out a big black

plug of tobacco, he very deliberately bit off a big chew, and as he was about to return it to his pocket one of the men near him said, "Gimme a chaw, John." He handed it over. "B'l'eve I 'll take one tu, es hit 's handy," said another. "Hain't got mine with me; so 'low I 'd be much erbleged ter yer fer one," said a third. And so it went the rounds. When it was finally handed back to the owner it had so diminished in size that it was hardly worth putting back into his pocket; so he offered the remainder to a stranger who had just joined them. He refused, however, thanking the donor very courteously. He was a young man, very tall and straight, and had a soft blue eye. His face wore a boyish expression, although it was half concealed by a short beard. He was dressed in a neat dark suit and a soft felt hat. From every appearance he was a man from the outer world.

"Would you kindly tell me where I can find Mr. Jones, the teacher?" The crowd gave a perceptible start at the words of the stranger.

John gave the answer. "He stays at Simpson's, 'bout two miles down that road."

"Do you suppose I 'll find him at home?"

"Yer shore to, fer I jist saw him 'fore I left home, an' he is to be at home all day."

Thanking John for the information, he started off down the road in the direction of Simpson's.

"Funny he did n't ast how ter git thar," said one of the company.

"Mebbe he 's been hayr afore," said another.

"'Pears ter me es ef I 've seed him somewhere," said still another.

"His face air a little familiar-lookin'," said the first. John left the men at their discussion and went inside the store. As he did so he saw Sam Carson sitting on a box, leaning against a counter, talking in his usual fluent manner to Mr. Ware, the storekeeper and postmaster. He turned upon John a bland smile and said: "How do you do, John, I am glad to see that you are getting around again. You seem to have fully recovered your strength."

"I 'low so," was the short answer.

"I was just telling Mr. Ware that if this

weather keeps up that it won't be long until you farmers can be breaking ground."

John sat down without making any reply to the last remark of the young man, and the latter turned his attention to Mr. Ware once more. Presently a man came in to do some trading. After he had bought a few articles he purchased a stamp and mailed a letter. John watched Carson from under his hat, which was drawn down over his eyes. He was sure he saw him closely watching the merchant as the latter opened the safe in order to make some change. After Mr. Ware had satisfied the wants of the customer and had returned to his seat, Carson arose and said, "Well, I guess I 'll be on my way, for I 'm going to Sullivan, to be gone a few days." As he went to the door and out into the road he little realized that a giant backwoodsman who sat silently chewing and spitting his black tobacco saw through his well-acted ruse and was at that moment laying a plan that would foil him.

After he had gone, John called Mr. Ware aside and had a low-toned conversation with him, which seemed to excite the merchant very

much. After John had left the store he went over to Nettles's and had a brief talk with the three men there, and then went home.

That evening just after dark two men rode up in front of the gate at Simpson's and whistled. The door of the house was opened almost immediately, and the teacher, accompanied by the stranger of the morning, came out.

"So you did not forget me, John," said Ray; and then, seeing John nod a questioning nod toward the stranger, he continued: "He's all right. He will help us out. He is a friend of mine."

"Yer can ride 'hind me, an' he can ride 'hind paw," said John, pointing toward the stranger.

The moon was flooding the earth with its glorious light when the party arrived at the store. John took the horses into the woods across the road, where they were perfectly concealed. Then they went around to the side door of the store and were admitted by Mr. Ware. The store was dark, save for the moonlight coming in at the back window.

"The others air all hayr," said the merchant; and Mr. Nettles, his three sons, and three other men came forward out of the darkness.

"I 'low we 'll outnumber them," said John, as he looked over the force, an' then hit 'll be a s'prise anyhow. Now yer 'd better git home, Mr. Ware, so 's they can call yer out ter unlock fer 'em when they come, fer they 'll be hayr 'fore long."

The merchant slipped quietly out, locked the door behind him, and went to his house, just a few steps from the store.

As soon as he had gone John took command.

"How many guns yer got?" he asked. All were armed. "That 's good. Now le's git behind the counter an' wait tel they come. Do n't fire tel I give the word." They all quickly obeyed, and when they were crouched behind the counter, John spoke again: "We do n't wan' ter take no chances, fer they 're go'n' ter fight hard when they find out thet they 're ketched."

More than an hour had passed, when the patience of the little squad was rewarded by

hearing the sound of hoofbeats on the ground. John slipped to the front window and peered out. He saw six men dismount from their horses, and one of them took the horses into the woods, while the five came up toward the store and passed around to the side on which the merchant's house was situated. The watcher could not see their faces, for they all wore masks; but he was sure that the lithe, graceful figure in the lead was Sam Carson. As John resumed his position with the others behind the counter a loud knocking was heard, and then voices speaking in indistinct tones. Presently footsteps approached the door, and a key grated in the lock. Mr. Ware entered, followed by the five masked men. The men behind the counter silently cocked their guns and awaited the signal of their leader. One of the robbers continued to cover the merchant with his gun, while the other four went to rifling the stamp and money drawers, which were empty.

"The' hain't nuthin' in hayr," said one.

"I know it," replied another, who was rummaging under the shelves. "Have the old gent

step over this way and open this safe." Mr. Ware went forward and knelt down before the safe and began to work the combination. The door swung open; he arose and stepped back, while the robbers gathered around and began to examine the contents. So engrossed were they that they failed to notice the figures approaching silently from the other side of the room.

"Hands up!"

They turned with one accord, firing as they did so. One of the ten figures fell.

"Fire!" came the command, and nine guns were discharged. Two of the robbers went down, and the other three, seeing they were hopelessly outnumbered, dropped their guns and threw up their hands.

"Come on, some of you fellers, an' tie 'em!" said John. At that moment one of the masked men made a dash for the door, which was unguarded; but the move was foreseen by the tall, bearded stranger, who quickly grasped the fleeing robber and jerked him roughly back. Then he tore the mask from the captive's face and,

backing him toward the window, where the light fell on his face, he said in a strained voice, "Is it you, Jack?" The horrified robber looked into the face of his captor; and then, as if he recognized him, a look of triumph overspread his features as he replied: "So you are posing as somebody, are you? Well, it won't be long until they find you out, and then you'll go with us."

"I've paid my penalty," said the stranger, quietly, "and I am a sadder but, I trust, a wiser man."

The three men were securely bound, and a light was brought, so that the wounded might be attended to. The one who had fallen among the party of captors was one of Nettles's neighbors. His wound was not serious, being in the forearm. One of the robbers, who proved to be a Jefferson, was also slightly wounded; but the other, who was Sandy Rowen, was shot through the stomach and appeared to be in a dying condition. They lifted him up on the counter and made him as comfortable as possible, while they attended to his wound as best they could. When the masks were removed

from the faces of the other two they were found to be one of the Handlans and Bill Rupert.

"I 'low we 'll hev ter spend the rest of the night with yer, Mr. Ware, fer the sheriff won't be hayr tel mornin'. I sent word fer him ter come, but 'lowed we could manage with these gen'lemen tel then. Dan, you and George go out and invite the other gentleman in ef he's thar yit. I 'low he might git tired waiten' out there."

The two brothers went out, laughing at John's droll speech, but soon returned, saying that the gentleman was not to be found.

"He 'lowed he 'd find better comp'ny somers else," said one of the men, on hearing the report.

All through the night the captors guarded their prisoners and did what they could to relieve the suffering of the wounded. They divided in two squads, and one slept while the other watched. Ray was in John's squad, and was to sleep the first part of the night. He lay down on the floor on some sacks, but try as he would, he could not sleep. As he lay there he

could see the prisoners lying in a row, apparently fast asleep. The three Nettleses were guarding. They refrained from talking, so that they would not disturb those who were sleeping, and the forced silence and inactivity had a drowsy effect upon them. Presently they were all three asleep. Ray saw a slight movement among the captives, and at first thought to arouse the guards; but when he remembered that the prisoners were securely bound he decided that it was unnecessary. In a moment he saw Carson raise himself upon his elbow and slowly move his hand down toward his bound feet. Ray was about to give the alarm, when out from the shadow a low voice uttered the name, "Hartsel." Carson immediately dropped to the floor. As Ray glanced across the room he saw the bearded stranger in a half-reclining position, pointing a gun at Carson. No one else was conscious of what was passing. Presently George Nettles awoke from his nap, and as he did so the stranger dropped to the floor. George awoke the other two sleepers. At first they seemed

alarmed, but when they saw that the prisoners were still safe they settled back in their seats and determined to be more careful the remainder of their watch. At two o'clock the other squad relieved them, and they sat fully awake until the break of day.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SILVER LINING



VERY early in the morning came the sheriff with a posse. They had ridden hard from the county seat during the night. All the prisoners were soon ready for the return trip—all save Sandy Rowen. Upon examination it was found that his wound was so serious that it would be impossible for him to be moved. It was therefore arranged to place him in the room back of the store and await some change in his condition. As the posse were preparing to start with their prisoners, Carson looked at the group of bystanders maliciously and, nodding his head to where the master and stranger stood, he said: "Never mind, gentlemen, your time is coming soon to wear this jewelry." Here he held up his hands, displaying the handcuffs. No one replied, and in a moment the officers and their prisoners dis-

appeared in the distance. After they had gone the crowd of men began to show signs of breaking up. Ray held up his hand in a gesture to detain them, as he said: "Just a moment, friends. Before you go, let me tell you who my friend here is. Perhaps you know him better than I do, but he is somewhat changed, and you have failed to recognize him. This is your old friend, Donald Watkins."

If a flash of lightning had come from the cloudless sky that morning it would not have caused more amazement than did that announcement of Ray's. John Whiteside was the first to recover himself, and he approached the stranger, looked into his face a moment and said: "Wall, hit shore is Uncle Jim's boy, Don, though I'd never 'a' knowed yer with them whiskers." By this time all the men were gathered around and were shaking hands with Don and asking him all kinds of questions. "Whar yer been all this time?" "When did yer git back?" and many more. The young man very courteously told them that he had been in a good many places, and that he had just arrived in the community

on the day before. After he had answered many more curious questions he excused himself, telling them that he had not seen his parents yet, and that he was so anxious to see them that he was going to his home at once. He and the master immediately started for Don's home. When they came to the brow of the hill overlooking the valley in which the little house was, Don stopped and said, "Mr. Jones, you go on down, and when you are inside the house I'll stand on that rock and whistle, as I used to do, and see if they remember."

While Ray was going down the hillside, Don Watkins viewed from the old rock, on which he had stood many times as a boy, the home of his boyhood. As he gazed upon the quiet little valley with the little log house in its midst, the tears began to roll down his cheeks. He thought of all his wayward, misspent life, and how he had neglected his kind old parents. A wave of remorse swept over his soul. When the master had disappeared he wiped his eyes, placed his finger to his lips, and gave a long, shrill whistle that went echoing off down

through the valley. The back door of the little house opened and he saw his mother appear, shade her eyes with her hands, and look upward. He waved his hand. She recognized him and started toward the side gate to meet him. He dashed down the hillside and was soon encircled by those trembling old arms. By this time the father had joined them and had thrown his arms about his son's neck. The three went into the house arm in arm, a very happy trio indeed. Ray had been watching the scene from the window, and when they had entered there was a certain moisture about his eyes that looked like tears. When they were all seated in the big front room, Don spoke: "Mother, I did not think you would know me with this beard?"

"Wall, son, I do wish yer 'd git rid of hit, but I 'u'd a-knowed you, no matter how yer was changed."

"Don, can't yer tell us whut yer been doin' an whar yer been sence yer been away?" said the father?"

"Yes, I will, father; but let me say before I begin that some parts of my experience won't

sound good to you, for I have n't been the best fellow in the land." And then he told this story of his wanderings:

When he had left that day, about five years ago, to go to the postoffice, a sudden desire seized him to go to Sullivan. Yielding to it, he set out for that place. On arriving there he had been loafing about the station when a freight train pulled in and stopped. Two men climbed out of an empty box car and seated themselves on a pile of railroad ties not far from the station. Curiosity had led Don to go to where these two men were sitting and engage in conversation with them. He found that they were beating their way to Texas, and they invited him to accompany them. A few moments later, when the train pulled out, three men climbed into the empty box car instead of two, and Don Watkins was one of them. After much tramping and begging they finally landed in Texas. Here it was that Don separated himself from his two companions, determined to find work. He succeeded in getting a job as a clerk in a store in a small, enterprising town in

the cattle region, and for a few months he did very well. One day he met a young man who called himself Jack Hartsel, and this new acquaintance proved his downfall. Don had previously learned to gamble, but had decided to quit when he arrived in Texas. Hartsel proved to be a professional in that line, and showed Don that it was an easier way to make a living than by honest labor. So persistent in his temptations was he that at last Don began to gamble; just a little at first, but in a short time it was every evening after working hours were over. Money came easily, for it was not long until he had learned all the tricks of the profession from Hartsel. He got negligent about his work and was finally discharged. Then he went into partnership with Hartsel. All went well. They were winning much money and were living in grand style until one sad day about seven months after Don had landed in that town. One night they were playing in a gambling annex to one of the saloons in the town and were winning heavily, when a stranger entered and was permitted to take part in the game. They soon

found out that he was a master in that line, and they tried every trick they knew, but found that he could always show a better one. They played on desperately until all their money was gone. Then Hartsel arose, pulled out a gun, shot the gambler, grabbed the money from the table, and was gone. Officers rushed into the room and arrested Don. The man did not die, for the wound was not a serious one; and when Don was brought up for trial the man swore that he had done the shooting, and as a result of the trial he was sentenced to the State prison for a term of three years. Hartsel was never heard of afterward. When Don had served his time he had wandered about from place to place till one day out in Kansas in a little place where he had stopped to work, he picked up a copy of the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* and saw the following notice: "Will Donald Watkins, formerly of Spring Bluff, Mo., write, giving his present address, as we would like to communicate with him on an important matter. Walters and Cleave, Attorneys, Union, Mo."

Don at once set out to answer the summons

in person, thinking that his parents were dead, or perhaps sick. When he arrived in Union the lawyers to whom he went asked him to wait until they could send for a man from out in the country under whose direction they had acted in advertising for him. Then it was that, after waiting, he met Ray, who told him all about his parents, how much they needed him; and how they had prayed for his return. Don had wanted to go out with Ray that very evening, but the latter thought that he had better go first and prepare the old folks for the great surprise. "And now," said Don, turning to Ray as he concluded his story, "I feel that some explanation is due you concerning what took place last night between myself and that robber they called Sam Carson. That is the man who ruined me. That is Jack Hartsel."

"Do n't say 'ruined,' Don, for remember you are just beginning to live," said Ray. A knock sounded at the front door, and when it was opened a boy all out of breath entered. "Sandy Rowen air dyin', an' he wants ter see the teacher," said the boy.

"All right, I 'll go at once." And with an "I 'll see you later, Don," Ray went out at the heels of the boy. When he arrived at the store he went into the little back room, where he found poor Sandy Rowen in a death agony. The wounded man looked up into Ray's face as the latter placed his hand gently on the other's head.

"Wall, teacher, I 'low I 'm done fer; but thar 's one decent thing I 'd like ter do 'fore I die, and thet is ter cl'ar yer name. I burnt the skeulhouse," he said, weakly, and was about to go on, when Ray interrupted him:

"Wait, Sandy, till I call some one else in to hear that;" and stepping to the door, he called to George Nettles, who had been deputized to guard over the wounded man, and Mr. Ware to come into the room.

"Now say that again, in the presence of these two men, Sandy."

The dying man repeated the words, "I burnt the skeulhouse; but I done hit 'cause Sam Carson tole me ter." And then he went on, in a weak, hurried voice, as if he was afraid his

strength would give out before he had said all he wanted to say. "Yer see, the' was a gang of us, and we had ter do whatever we was tol ter do, fer Carson was the leader of the gang. He said if I 'ud burn hit down, he 'd see to hit thet folks 'ud say thet hit was you thet done hit, an' then we 'd git yer ouden this place; so I done hit, an' I 'm sorry. Can yer fergive me, teacher, fer causin' yer all this trouble?"

"Of course I forgive you, and may God also," replied Ray.

"Will yer pray thet He will?" pleaded Rowen.

Ray knelt and prayed.

"Now I feel better, but I got sumpin' else thet I want ter say before I leave. Hit was our gang thet tied Jake Whiteside ter a tree and skeered him so bad thet he went crazy. We was dressed like devils and stuck pitchforks at him, and threatened ter burn him. Oh, hit was mean, I know, ter do sich things, but he was allus around the ole mill, an' thet 's whar we met; so we 'lowed he 'd git us in trouble ef we did n't make him quit comin' 'round thar. Hit

was me thet shot John Whiteside at the dance at Rupert's. Tell him an' ast him ter fergive me, fer I am so sorry that I done all this meanness. Oh, can God fergive me of all this! Hev mercy!" he cried out in agony, and then was quiet for a moment. The watchers thought he was gone, but he rallied and spoke again: "Good-bye, I 'm goin'. Hope God won't be too hard on me." He closed his eyes, drew a long breath, and was dead. Ray drew the sheet up over his face and turned away from the sad sight.

Mr. Ware took his hand and said, "Mr. Jones, I 'low thet cl'ars yer, an' I 'm shore glad of hit, fer I hated ter b'l'eve thet yer burnt the skeulhouse."

"I 'm sorry that I ever allowed myself to think for a moment that you did such a thing," said George, after he had taken the hand that the other man had released.

"That 's all right, gentlemen; I know that you had good reasons for thinking as you did, and I won't hold it against you," replied Ray.

"I guess I can go home now, for there 's not

much danger of Sandy getting away now," said George. "Won't you go with me, Mr. Jones, and help me tell the good news, for I do n't suppose there is a home in the whole country that will be more pleased to hear that your innocence is established than ours."

"I do n't know of anything to hinder me; so I believe that I'll accept your invitation, George," said Ray.

When the two friends arrived at George's home they found the family gathered in the front room, discussing the exciting events that had taken place at the store. Dan was just telling how Don Watkins looked as Ray and George entered, and with one accord the family arose to greet them. George told them of Sandy Rowen's dying confession, and concluded by saying, "We should all be ashamed of ever entertaining a doubt as to Mr. Jones's innocence."

"All but Roxy," added Dan. "Nobody could make her believe that he was guilty."

Roxy blushed furiously, and Mr. Nettles said, "Wall, we air ashamed of it; but I can say that I never more 'n half b'l'eved hit."

"I do n't want you to feel bad about this affair, for you all had reason enough to believe it. Every circumstance was against me, and I was comparatively a stranger among you. But now, since the cloud has showed its silver lining and my name is cleared from suspicion, I have a request to make of you." Here Ray walked over to where Roxy stood, a little apart from the others. Taking her hand, he turned to the little group and said, "I do n't want to rob you parents of your daughter, nor you brothers of your sister, but I would like to hear you say that I may join your happy family as Roxy's husband."

The father was the first to speak: "Mr. Jones, I did n't know that my gal loved yer tel now."

"I did," broke in Dan, with a grin at his sister.

The father laid a hand on the daughter's head and, looking down into her eyes, said, "Dô yer love him, Roxy?"

"Yes," came the answer, softly.

“Then take her, Mr. Jones, fer I know yer a true man,” said the father, gently.

Roxy threw herself into her mother’s arms, and as the two shed tears of happiness the girl said, “Mother, you were right, for the cloud has shown its silver lining.”

CHAPTER XX

THE DAWN OF BETTER THINGS

HOW 'S trade comin'?" Our old friend John Whiteside asked the question as he dismounted from Roan before the door of the old Spring Creek mill one beautiful June morning. He asked the information of a young man who stood in the doorway. His clothes were white with meal-dust and his black hair had a grayish appearance. One would hardly have recognized Don at first sight, as he had lost the beard which had half concealed his boyish face. From under his dusty eyelashes two soft blue eyes looked forth smiling at the newcomer, and the voice that made answer to the inquiry had in it a hearty ring. "Oh, trade's better than I could expect, John. How's your wife?"

"She's right peart. When yer seed Mr. Jones last?"

"I saw him only yesterday," replied Don.

"Come in out of the sun, John, and I 'll tell you all I know about him, for I know you are like the rest of us. You are anxious to know all about the man who has done so much for this community."

"Yer jist betcher life I do, fer me an' Lou 'low he 's 'bout the best friend we ever hed," replied John, following Don into the mill.

A great change had been wrought here since Don's home-coming. The old mill, which had been unused for several years save by the gang of outlaws as a rendezvous, had been overhauled and put in good repair, and was now the scene of beneficial activity. Don had announced that he would run it, and the old patrons began to return to the old place to have their grinding done. At first he had only intended to grind one day out of each week, but business had increased so rapidly that it had become necessary to grind two and oftentimes three days.

John sat down on an upturned box while Don went to refill the hopper before seating himself. As soon as he had done this he came

back and seated himself on a pile of sacks in front of John and began: "Well, you remember the night of the wedding, two weeks ago, he was telling us that he did not know about teaching here again, as his father, who is getting old, wanted him and Roxy to go back to Illinois to live, and it was hard for him to decide just what was his duty in the matter. Well, yesterday he and his wife came down to see father and mother, and he told us that he had fully decided that his work was in these hills, for God needs him here and has called him to stay until his work is finished. The new schoolhouse will be finished before September, and, of course, it will be larger and better than the old one. He is going around now trying to get the larger boys and girls who have quit school because they thought that to be able to read, write, and figure is enough education, to return to the school in the fall and continue their studies. Many have promised to return. He also expects to start a Bible school on Sundays, with occasional services for the old folks. He's not a preacher, but he's surely doing a preacher's

work very successfully. I predict that this will work a great change in this place."

"Jist look whut he 's done already," broke in John. "Whut 'd he do fer Lou in the way of l'arnin' an' bein' good, and it was him thet led me ter know thet great Friend who never goes back on us. Look at our family; all of 'em better 'cause of him. Even Jake's mind is gittin' stronger sence he knows thet ornery gang of outlaws hes been sent whar they can't bother him no more. Every chap 'at 's been under him at school is livin' better an' causin' thar folks ter live better. Them Ruperts an' Jeffersons an' Handlans are all better 'n the' wus 'fore he come."

"Yes," said Don, as John paused for a moment for breath, "and what has he done for me? Brought me home, pointed me to the same Friend that you found, who was able to help me up when I was down about as far as a man could get. All that I am and ever expect to be is due to Mr. Jones's faithfulness in answering the call of God through these hills."

"Wall, I shore am glad he is goin' ter stay,"

said John, rising from his seat and starting to the door, "I must git home an' tell Lou 'bout all this good news. Wonder whar they 're goin' ter live?"

"Mr. Nettles and the boys are going to help him build a house on that part of the Nettles farm that joins on to the school land," replied Don.

"It 'll be handy fer him," said John, as he threw his leg over the horse's back and made ready to start. Don was standing in the door again.

"I 'low yer right, Don, when yer say thet this 'll be a different place, fer he hes heard the 'Call of the Hills.' "

Don stood watching the horse and rider until they had disappeared around the bend in the road, and then he turned and went to the box into which the golden meal was pouring and began to fill a sack with the yellow hoard.

AUG 16 1913

